

SHIDEN KANZAKI

神崎紫電

Illustration
鵜飼沙樹



ブラックバレット

[黒の銃弾]

煉獄の彷徨者



電撃文庫

ブラック・アラート

[黒の銃弾]

煉獄の彷徨者

6

神崎紫電

Illustration
鵜飼沙樹



「三秒だよ。それで決めて」



「死んだって聞いて……
とれだけウチが心配したか」



「動くなッ！
妙な真似をすると撃つぞ」

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Black Bullet Volume 6

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To see a world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.

William Blake

Chapter 3 - Hotaru Kouro

Part 1

Seeing Superintendent Atsurou Hitsuma from the MPD headquarters opening the interrogation room's door to make his tardy arrival, Magata Police Station's Inspector Shigetoku Tadashima saluted despite how exasperated he felt towards his superior.

"How is the current situation?"

Lifting his glasses with a middle finger, Hitsuma asked with a keen expression while the middle-aged and slightly obese Tadashima replied:

"Yeah, please have a look yourself, Superintendent Hitsuma."

On the other side of the one-way mirror, a man roughly in his fifties was being questioned. His face was deeply tanned from sunlight exposure while his hair was half grayed. Due to his face looking a bit swollen, his eyes seem to be sunken.

A person's character and experiences tend to show on the face. This was a rule of experience that Tadashima had gathered from his long years as a detective. Based on this intuition, this guy was probably a crafty customer.

"Who is he?"

"Yuuki Iwama, fifty-six years old, taxi driver. According to witnesses, he had allegedly picked up Rentaro Satomi and Hotaru Kouro as passengers, hence we are questioning him. However, he firmly denies transporting anyone similar to those two."

"Isn't there a recording device on the taxi that keeps track of where it has been driven?"

"Yes, but the taxi company he's working for advertises itself as having the cheapest fares in the Tokyo Area, so they cut costs in many areas."

"What is your gut feeling, Inspector Tadashima?"

"This guy is probably fishy."

Hitsuma crossed his arms in front of his chest.

"In that case, can't we force him to spill it?"

"He's just a person of interest! Besides, have you even seen the scene at the apartment, Superintendent?"

"Yes, a quick glance. Tragic indeed."

Hitsuma deliberately shook his head with a pained expression but seemed rather pretentious in tone of voice. There was a decisive lack of what one could call the soul of language.

"Tragic" was already a very conservative description.

Tadashima was the first person to step into the scene. At the high-rise apartment building where the Gastrea autopsy specialist, forensic pathologist Dr. Ayame Surumi lived, the scene inside was akin to hell. Apartment residents who had escaped death testified that there was a tire monster attacking them. In the process of carefully inspecting the building's interior, the police had also found two machines resembling tires whose propulsion devices had been destroyed.

With the terrifying scene branded on the back of his eyes flashing through his mind again, Tadashima waved his hand to drive away the delusions in his brain.

"The female doctor whom Rentaro Satomi visited was murdered in the bathroom. The death occurred some time ago so Rentaro and his accomplice are not the culprits. After that, the aforementioned bizarre machine began a massacre, then Rentaro Satomi conducted another rescue operation again. Most puzzling of all is the corpse in the elevator. It was discovered in the elevator whose cables were severed, causing the elevator to crash into the second floor of the basement. However, the corpse was severely damaged and hence cannot be identified. It even had stuff like mechanical parts inside that became exposed. Damn it, I feel like I'm about to go crazy. Why do corpses turn up wherever Rentaro Satomi goes?"

"What are your thoughts, Inspector Tadashima?"

Only then did Tadashima notice that Hitsuma was observing his reaction with a solemn face.

There was a faint chill in his gaze. Under such conditions, Tadashima barely managed to gather his thoughts.

"Apart from us, there is definitely some other person or organization trying to hunt them down. However, what I can't figure out are Rentaro and his accomplice's actions. According to that doctor named Kakujou, Satomi and the girl had approached him by pretending to be the female doctor's family, so they must have their reasons for doing so. Perhaps he's trying to clear his name."

"..."

Trying hard not to be bothered by Hitsuma's unpleasant silence, Tadashima suggested:

"How about we simply disclose the investigation to the public?"

"Impossible."

Hitsuma immediately refused.

"After the Magata Plaza Hotel incident, the media has already reported that Rentaro Satomi fell into the river and died. If the public were to find out he was still casually on the run in the Tokyo Area, as though making a mockery of the police's search, what dignity would we have left? He must be arrested secretly, whereupon we would claim to the outside world that we had actually fished him out of the river from the very start."

Is it really because of that? Tadashima could only doubt for some reason.

Tadashima was unsure whether his doubt was known to Hitsuma, who was staring intently at the one-sided mirror, continuing to observe the interrogation.

"Seriously... Things would be so much simpler if that driver were to confess everything honestly..."

Hitsuma muttered in a low voice of monotony.

Finally freed from the police's questioning, taxi driver Yuuki Iwama found that the time was already past 2am.

The instant he left the police station's entrance, steaming hot summer air greeted him. The high humidity brought an amazing sense of unpleasantness.

Panting in exhaustion, he burrowed into his car and turned the key to start the engine.

After releasing him, the police said they might question him again. Judging from that, they were probably going to find him at his employer's company.

Already utterly exhausted, he was in no mood to continue his shift, so Yuuki decided to go straight home.

Because his wife might still be awake at this hour, he tried sending a text but did not get a response.

Apart from disappointment, he also felt relieved. Had he told his wife he was taken by the police, it was not hard to imagine her endless questions. Even if she was his most beloved, he could not tell his wife about the passengers he had taken.

Finally returning to his home in a quiet residential neighborhood, Yuuki suddenly felt that something was not right. Someone seemed to be in the house which was still completely lit.

Was his wife still awake? While feeling surprised, Yuuki drove the car past the main entrance, preparing to enter the garage. Just at that moment, he examined the garden. The lawnmower was left outside without being put away. This did not seem like something his meticulous wife would do, seeing as she absolutely loathed leaving messes around.

The main door was unlocked. Turning the handle and pulling, he found the door opening with the sound of friction. The shoes at the entrance were scattered all over the floor in a mess while there were mud trails left by something heavy getting dragged.

It was almost as though his wife had been knocked unconscious while she was working in the garden, then dragged into the house...

Due to his own imagination, Yuuki felt an unpleasant feeling in his chest.

Hence he reached for the side of the door and pressed the doorbell installed outside.

Two shrill rings were heard inside the house.

No response at all—

No, a bit of light was leaking out from the living room at the far end of the corridor. There seemed to be a faint noise from that direction.

Yuuki's heart was pounding noisily while his breathing became quick.

Something happened—Yuuki was sure of it.

Picking up the porcelain vase standing at the entrance, he poured out the flowers and water inside it then carried the vase as a weapon. Then very naturally, he stepped over the door threshold without removing his shoes.

As he approached the living room, he became more and more aware that the sound was someone's painful moan.

Arriving at the living room entrance, Yuuki made his decision and burst through the well-lit door all at once.

He was instantly shocked.

"Izuho!"

His wife was collapsed on the living room floor, her hands and feet bound by tape with a cloth stuffed in her mouth and blindfolded. Squirming like a caterpillar, she was moaning.

Yuuki hastily ran over when suddenly someone grabbed him from behind and even held a sharp instrument against his neck. That thing felt cold, most likely the tip of a blade.

"Don't look back."

Full of menace, the man's low voice spoke.

Yuuki's entire body went tense as cold sweat broke out on his forehead.

—A burglar?

"W-What are you planning to do?"

"The voice from behind answered extremely calmly.

"I can tell you, but that means you and the woman must die."

As though emphasizing that this answer was more than enough, the man's forceful tone of voice did not ask for Yuuki's understanding at all.

"I just want to ask one thing. Where did you carry Rentaro Satomi and Hotaru Kouro to in your taxi?"

The guy was not a burglar.

This guy was someone in pursuit of that CivSec.

Yuuki was unable to respond after getting threatened. The man behind him said slowly:

"You have two options. Tell me directly where they went, or suffer first then tell me where they went."

"Suffer...?"

"First the nails. A total of twenty pieces. Not yours, but that woman's. After pulling all of those out, I start lopping fingers off. You can decide when you want to speak up."

The vase in Yuuki's hand fell to the ground, breaking with an astounding sound.

Without caring about his neck's outer skin getting cut, he simply shook his head forcefully while large beads of tears fell.

"P-Please, anything but that."

"Then you know what to do."

Mentally, Yuuki clapped his hands together and apologized to Rentaro. Sorry, I'm really sorry.

"Eighteenth ward of the Tokyo Area. The illegal alien slum at Nagatoro City."

"Got it."

Feeling his restraints loosened, Yuuki felt the darkness behind him shift slightly away.

Shrouded by instantaneous silence, he slowly sneaked a peek backwards.

He could not see any signs of the intruder.

Knowing he was saved, he knelt down on the spot.

After who knew how many investigation meetings, Hitsuma was eating mediocre-tasting takeout at the meeting room when someone called his cellphone.

Seeing the name of the caller, he instantly stood up and went to a corridor where there was no one else before picking up the call.

"Swordtail? Seeing as you called directly instead of passing the message through Nest, this must be very important, right?"

'I have already found out where those guys took the taxi to. Seems to be the Tokyo Area's eighteenth ward, in Nagatoro City's illegal alien slum.'

"Well done. I'll come up with countermeasures from this side very soon. Is that all you have to report?"

For some reason, the other side fell silent. Finally, in a low voice lacking in emotions, the man asked:

'Was Hummingbird really taken out?'

Hitsuma could not find words for an instant.

"...Yes."

'Fine, given how much she loved to show off, perhaps she deserved it. Hmph, as soon as I think of how much my workload will increase, I'd say good riddance.'

"Careful. This time, the enemy isn't that easy."

'No problem.'

Ending the conversation, Hitsuma stared at his cellphone for a long while.

If the next operation failed to conclude this affair, he would have to dispatch Swordtail for the job.

Given it was just Rentaro as one enemy, he really did not want to mobilize Swordtail, but if he sent Swordtail, surely Rentaro and Hotaru could be executed at once.

Snickering while suppressing the joyful grin on his face, Hitsuma turned around and left.

Part 2

Leading Hotaru Kouro, Rentaro Satomi passed through the door curtain and reached outdoors. As though waiting for this moment, the attendant called out to them: "Thank you for your patronage."

The bath house's lights all switched off at once. For eyes that had gotten used to the brightness, this sudden darkness was frightening, but appearing in the night sky was starlight that helped illuminate their path.

Rentaro felt a warm feeling throughout his entire body.

Looking quite comfortable, Hotaru looked towards Rentaro with cheeks that were reddened from having just taken a bath.

"I jumped in fright when you suddenly suggested going to a bath house, but the hot water here really was great."

"Yeah yeah, it's my utmost honor to win your acknowledgement, princess."

Despite retorting casually, Rentaro also thought that a stroll under the starry night with no one else around felt quite nice—supposing he did not consider his current situation.

Confirming the time, it was already past 2am.

Probably due to being washed and dried in the coin-operated washing machine at the bath house, his shirt had shrunk slightly. Hence, there was a kind of unnatural tension when he stretched hard.

Hotaru's torn tank top was also patched up using needle and thread. Although there were slight blood stains remaining, it was already washed to the point that they were difficult to notice.

The heated battle against Hummingbird had taken place less than seven hours prior.

Although getting all covered in wounds was commonplace, Rentaro was unable to dip himself into hot water. Hence, all he could do was wait until all the other customers were gone before he used a towel to wipe off the sweat and dirt from his body.

Also, there was one more thing, but Rentaro dismissed it as unimportant. During the battle against Hummingbird, a ricocheted bullet had struck his left leg, except that after extracting the bullet and doing simple first aid, he decided that the wound was not going to tear open even when he was walking.

Normally, he would not have handled it himself, instead rushing to the hospital immediately, but now that he was a fugitive, this could not be helped.

"Do you take baths together with Suibara?"

Hotaru glared at Rentaro with eyes of displeasure.

"Why are you asking that? Could it be that you, Rentaro... you take baths together with your own Initiator?"

Rentaro scratched his head awkwardly.

"No, I was forced, so I didn't have a choice. But damn it, I shouldn't have visited someone else's home together with her. That girl tricked me."

Hotaru sighed then stared at him with eyes of pity.

"No wonder you're so famous, Rentaro, being only interested in ten-year-old girls and even strolling about the streets in the middle of the night with a young girl's underwear over your head. My advice to you is to stop engaging in such suspicious behaviors."

"Hold on, where did that conclusion come from?"

Hotaru turned her face to the side.

"Why are you looking away?"

With an embarrassed face, Hotaru did not reply. Feeling deeply fearful, Rentaro was about to continue questioning her when right at that moment, a pedestrian approaching from ahead passed by them.

For some reason, Rentaro felt as though the guy had stared a few times at him, making his emotions run cold instantly.

Taking out sunglasses from this pocket, Rentaro then took out a leather glove to wear and camouflage his black prosthetic hand of supervaranium.

After discussing with Hotaru, they decided it would be best to hide his face and exposed artificial arm, hence they had hastily bought these.

Yesterday, Rentaro had taken Hotaru to visit Shidao University Hospital where they had talked to a doctor named Kakujou before heading off to forensic pathologist Dr. Surumi's apartment where they were attacked by Hummingbird.

It was still unclear how Hummingbird had gotten a hold on their location but Rentaro's first suspicions were the pedestrians walking past them on the streets having called the police after noticing his face.

Then another highly likely reason was that of security cameras.

When security cameras in the Tokyo Area captured the invasion of Gastrea, using thermal imagery and other factors, they would identify Gastrea using internal calculations. This system was apparently used to send out alerts to nearby CivSecs as well.

According to Rentaro's speculations, just by tweaking this Gastrea identification software, or entering a certain person's information such facial or iris characteristics, a wide net could be cast to capture wanted people.

No matter which reason turned out to be true, wearing sunglasses to hide the eyes would bring immediate effect. However—

"Gah! This isn't working!"

Rentaro took off the sunglasses. Wearing them in the middle of the night turned his view all dark, making him walk unsteadily as though announcing he was a suspicious person. Grumbling to his companion, he only received a cold response of "you wearing all black is very bizarre in the first place."

Although his communications with Hotaru had resumed, lingering in Rentaro's heart was still a strong remnant of their clash of opinions from during the battle against Hummingbird.

—'Didn't I mention this? I am simply working with you in the hopes that your fresh blood will lure plenty of enemies for me to hunt. As bait, you are very successful. Although I'm slight sorry to say this, your sense of camaraderie is but an illusion. I actually hate you very much.'

—'If you want to save other people's lives, why didn't you save Mr. Kihachi in the first place?'

She probably understood how awkward things were between the two of them, hence the conversation was very stiff and impossible to continue for long.

One of them fell silent first, then the only sounds remaining were footsteps echoing across the empty streets in the shuttered commercial district.



After walking for some indeterminate duration, Hotaru finally murmured:

"When I ignored your advice and went upstairs alone, all the residents up there had been killed. Those people probably had parents and siblings, right?"

Hotaru slowly shook her head.

"I really cannot understand how it's possible for someone to kill so indiscriminately."

It looked like what happened at the apartment building had prompted Hotaru to reflect on her own thinking.

"Then you probably understand now? This is the kind of people you're going up against."

Just as Rentaro was thinking what to say next, a distant siren suddenly tore through the silence.

Rentaro and Hotaru exchanged glances.

Hotaru seemed to switch moods immediately. Rentaro could see her sharp gaze looking up at the night sky, searching for the source of the sound.

The siren slowly echoed while approaching their location.

It was a police siren sound that was now very familiar to Rentaro.

Sneaking into a narrow alley next to a nearby building, Rentaro and Hotaru suppressed their breathing to avoid attracting attention. The road here gave off a stench of oxidized grease.

Soon after, two police cars passed by the dark alley as expected, then disappeared.

Just to be safe, they first peered out from the dark alley, confirming the police cars had not turned back before stepping out onto the road. The police cars were probably far gone now.

Since the police cars had their sirens blaring and were driving fast, unlike ordinary patrols, it was probably an incident unrelated to Rentaro and Hotaru.

"That way leads to my hiding place."

Rentaro jumped in fright.

"No way."

Even though he rejected the conjecture, Rentaro could still feel Hotaru's words spreading gradually in the depths of his heart.

If Hotaru's guess was correct, then returning to their hiding place would be a very terrible choice.

If it was just their persecution mania at work, laughing it off as a joke would be fine, but if their fears turned out to be true, they could not run headlong into a trap. After all, what awaited the two of them was undoubtedly arrest as well as an unavoidable verdict of guilty.

"Is there any building nearby that's relatively tall?"

"No, but I can help take a look for you."

Saying that, Hotaru's eyes turned bright red. In the next instant, her figure disappeared with a trace, accompanied by wind pressure that compelled Rentaro to close his eyes.

Turning his neck, Rentaro soon found her standing on top of one of the regularly spaced streetlights that were shaped like lilies of the valley.

Rentaro could not help but feel frantic.

Even if there were almost no pedestrians on the street in the middle of the night, cars still passed by on occasion. If someone discovered a Cursed Child on the streets, assuredly some coward would cry out in a panic. Then like a signal, this would draw in a crowd gradually, making the situation unsalvageable.

Rentaro did not know if Hotaru possessed this sort of common sense, but she pointed forward and said with her naturally monotonous tone of voice:

"I still can't see anything. Let's go nearer."

Taking a clean leap, she was already standing on the next streetlight in the next second.

Rentaro stopped himself from dissuading her and followed her helplessly.

This tension-filled night march continued for quite a while.

Hotaru finally made an emergency stop. Rentaro almost noticed something amiss at almost exactly the same time.

The outer glass walls of the building towering in front of them was shining slightly from the illumination of red light and flashing repeatedly. No mistake, it was produced by a police car's revolving warning light reflecting off the building's exterior. Also, it was not just one car.

Hearing the quiet sound of heels striking the sidewalk, Hotaru returned to Rentaro's side.

"I saw it."

"We can't go back, right?"

Nodding, Hotaru continued:

"Let's give up on that hiding place. Staying here any further will be dangerous."

Rentaro shuddered. He had suggested going to bath house because he disliked the filthy bathroom at the hiding place, but the result of this moment's whim was pure coincidence.

Had they not taken that thoughtless decision, Rentaro and Hotaru's fate would have been sealed here. Had they stayed there, surely they would now be facing the police's harsh interrogation.

Turning around, the two of them went back along the path they had traveled. Although they had no place to go, leaving here first was imperative.

However, it was also problematic focusing all their attention behind them. Unfortunately, what was probably backup, a police car approached from the front. This time, there was no siren and the car was quite close by the time they realized.

Escaping into a dark alley in a panic now would be tantamount to declaring there were two suspicious persons here.

Rentaro grabbed Hotaru's hand. Despite her surprised expression, she immediately realized Rentaro's intent and held his hand in turn.

"As natural as possible."

Hotaru nodded lightly from the corner of Rentaro's eye. Giving off the quiet sound of exhaust, the police car was less than 20m away. Rentaro felt an urge to lower his head.

The car's lights flashed across the bottom of his chest. Somehow, the sound of tires rolling on the road surface felt especially ear splitting.

For some reason, the police car approached the side of the road, apparently slowing down. Rentaro could not help but lower his head further. Finally, the police car drove past Rentaro.

—We made it through?

Just as the distance increased slowly between them, Rentaro heard the sound of friction from tires stopping on the road behind him. Then came the sound a car door opening and shutting.

Rentaro closed his eyes. God help me.

He suddenly looked back to see two police officers getting off the car and approaching with a flashlight in hand.

"You two, hold up."

Despite shaking legs, Rentaro desperately suppressed his urge to break into a run and pretended not to hear, simply using a finger to gesture turning into an alley on the right.

Without any prior planning or communications, Rentaro and Hotaru took action with great coordination.

"Hotaru!"

Turning into the alley and seizing the moment when the police officers were out of sight, Rentaro called out quietly and Hotaru nodded in turn, wrapping her arm around Rentaro's waist.

"Hold on tight."

In the next instant, Rentaro felt as his entire body was struck by an impact that sent him flying. The astounding G-force of acceleration impacted his entire body, making him feel as though his innards were going to gush out. Having released her power, Hotaru jumped with holding Rentaro in her arm, using the principles of a triple jump to kick against the walls of two opposite buildings to move upwards. Held in her clutches, Rentaro felt his view shaken violently, almost ending up biting his own tongue.

Soon after, they landed on a roof. Thanks to experiencing this kind of high-speed Initiator movement on a daily basis, Rentaro managed to land stably and not fall over.

Looking down from the roof, they saw the two police officers chasing after them in a hurry but failing to find them in the alley, looking very awkward.

Before they could be noticed, Rentaro pulled his head back, thinking under the humid breeze. Soon, the surrounding police was going to flood the area after news of "figures suspected to be Satomi Rentaro and Hotaru Kouro have been sighted" were sent out wirelessly.

They must hurry and leave the area.

"That taxi driver guy must have leaked our whereabouts."

Hotaru murmured to herself in a rare tone of gloominess.

The instant their hiding place was discovered, the same speculation also went through Rentaro's mind but he deliberately drove it outside of his consciousness.

"Even so, it's our responsibility."

Rentaro and Hotaru had initially chosen to threaten the driver or to seal his mouth using cash. In the end, Rentaro had taken none of those actions, instead choosing to believe in him. The same for Hotaru.

Now that such a result had occurred, blaming others would not help anything.

"But it's still very sad."

"Yeah."

As they met gaze unintentionally, Rentaro could see a sad smile surfacing in Hotaru's shining eyes.

Rentaro felt his heart pounding intensely.

Was an Initiator caught in the middle ground between a girl and a woman, between human and Gastrea, capable of making such a dangerous smile?

To avoid getting further bewitched by her face, Rentaro hid from her gaze.

When the door handle was turned, the rusted door gave off a high-pitched, ear-splitting sound of metallic friction.

The cheap flashlight bought from a convenience store was not very helpful. With the additional lighting from Hotaru's cellphone's backlighting, Rentaro finally managed to illuminate the scenery of their surroundings.

The bare walls were white while the only two pillars in this vast space were also white. The floor was also white from the white marble and powdered stone.

To secure a place to sit down, Rentaro kicked away the powdered stone with his foot. White smoke instantly rose up and surrounded them, making them cough nonstop. Rentaro really regretted not buying a dust mask at the convenience store just now.

"Cough, but hiding here should be no problem, right?"

Having once again confirmed that this carving factory had been abandoned, Rentaro pulled down the rusted blinds above the window, blocking out the moonlight outside.

The interior became darker, instantly producing an atmosphere like a horror movie's. Even Rentaro himself felt cold and uncomfortable, but he had no choice but to endure at this time.

After all, if passersby reported the illumination of flashlights to the police, they would have to find another place for shelter.

Standing the flashlight up to serve as a lamp, Rentaro leaned his back against a pillar and sat down.

Sitting by his side, Hotaru stared at the floor with displeasure.

"I can't sleep without a pillow."

"We should count our lucky stars that we've got a roof."

The thought of staying at a hotel had occurred to Rentaro earlier but after careful consideration, he rejected it.

The police was not stupid. Once they realized Rentaro and Hotaru were not returning to their hiding place, they would immediately send people out to search various hotels. Simply the risk of wanted notices having been sent out already made it impossible to approach hotels lightly.

"Then what should we do next?"

"Well..."

Rentaro looked down and thought for a moment before answering:

"No matter what, I'm quite concerned about the Gastrea corpse with the '☆' marked on it. Killed Gastrea get disposed of after a certain length of time, but before that, they should be kept at a certain place. I'm going to try my luck there."

Hotaru nodded.

"Also, Rentaro, about that assassin called Hummingbird..."

"I wanted to discuss her too. That girl had a pentagram symbol at the base of her thigh just like the one on the Gastrea corpse. But the tips had two feathers instead of one."

Hotaru stared wide-eyed.

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"What on earth is going on?"

"No idea at all."

Currently, these were the only clues and they must gather more information if they were to continue the investigation.

Then the two of them discussed a bit about future plans before they ran out of conversation.

Between their silence, cicadas could be heard.

Rentaro was using his left hand as support against the floor when he suddenly felt something warm and soft cover his hand. He looked over in surprise to see it was Hotaru's palm.

"I... killed someone."

Hotaru was sitting with legs drawn to her chest. Hugging her knees tight, she looked even smaller.

Rentaro first checked out her appearance then replied slowly:

"Hotaru, being afraid of killing is a warning from your rationality. Don't forget that emotion. Once you cross the line, you'll lose all self control."

"What happens once I no longer fear killing people?"

"You'll lose your humanity. Like a serial killer or a demon... No matter what name you use, it's still very terrible."

"I see. Thank you, I'll remember that."

In contrast to her reply, what surfaced on Hotaru's face was a gloomy expression that was far from putting her worries aside. For an instant, the side of her face was superimposed with the girl from Rentaro's home whose only good quality was being energetic.

Rentaro shook his head. While thinking "what's with me?", he tried hard to force out a cheerful voice.

"Hey Hotaru, can I ask a stupid question?"

"What?"

"You said you possess the revival ability called Enhanced Regeneration but if you get shot in the head, you still die temporarily, right?"

"Cessation of pulse. Dilation of pupils. Stopping of the heart. Is that what you mean by death?"

"Then is there really... a heaven?"

During this time, Hotaru simply blinked hard, then sighed in an exaggerated manner and shook her head. Rentaro could not help but feel extremely awkward.

"W-What?"

"This question is really very stupid. In fact, it's the first time anyone asked me that."

Rentaro was thinking she did not want to answer at all but Hotaru glanced at him from the side.

"Do you believe in any religion?"

"No."

"Then let me tell you, there's no heaven. After my view goes dark, my consciousness suddenly cuts off. It's very similar to fainting."

"Then why did you ask me if I believe in any religion?"

"Because if you have a religion, you'll probably be very disappointed to hear that there's no heaven."

With a self-deprecating expression, Hotaru continued:

"Besides, I wouldn't be allowed in even if heaven existed. After all, heaven only allows humans, right? But I'm not human either."

Part 3

It was drizzling outside the window while detestable dark clouds had occupied the sky since morning.

The clerk's sleepy eyes looked as though he was drunk. It was almost as if the message "I can't believe there are people who are so free" was written on his face. With a lab coat sloppily draped over him, his hairstyle was a mess while his appearance was much older than his actual age.

The clerk was named Shibata.

"So you ran all the way here, early in the morning, just to have a look at Gastrea number 4490?"

"Is there a problem?"

"No, actually not at all... Fine, show me your license."

"This is mine."

Hotaru placed her license on the palm of the impatient Shibata's.

The guy instantly made a surprised look, causing Rentaro to get nervous for a second. Although it was not a hard and fast rule, the usual practice was for the Promoter to show the license during situations like this one.

Rentaro's license had been confiscated by Seitenshi.

"I left mine... at home."

"Okay, I see. Well, the Initiator's is fine too. Just sign here."

Hotaru signed her name without hesitation then put down the pen and looked up.

Rentaro followed her gaze. Behind the crude desk where Shibata was sitting, there was a long passage extending in the distance, blocked by a grated gate.

Wind coming from somewhere was echoing in the dark passage nonstop.

Probably due to the air conditioning used to preserve the cadavers, the air coming from inside was chilling to the bone. Next to Rentaro, Hotaru was hugging herself, rubbing her arms.

Early in the morning, Rentaro and Hotaru had come to this Gastrea morgue. Although the university hospital which Sumire was affiliated with also had a location for keeping Gastrea cadavers, it was quite unrefined if compared to a specialized facility like this one.

Shibata inserted the key and turned the lock on the gate. With a rusted turning sound, the gate opened. Led by Shibata, Rentaro and Hotaru advanced along the passage.

The ceiling lights were apparently blue LEDs, increasing the disgusting and unpleasant feeling. Probably due to the hardness of the floor materials, the trio's footsteps kept echoing nonstop.

Rentaro could not help but ask Shibata in front of him:

"Hey, why does this place need to be locked up behind a grated gate? Aren't the Gastrea transported here all dead?"

"There were a number of incidents in the past when Gastrea believed to be dead revived. Or tragedies like larva hiding in the bellies coming out. The grated fence is the lesson learnt."

Rentaro felt very agitated upon knowing about this. An infection outbreak could very well start from this kind of place.

While that was going through Rentaro's mind, Shibata went through a door and Rentaro and Hotaru followed.

Every step they took, it felt like the air temperature fell further.

This was a cramped room roughly the size of eight tatami mats, with one entire wall covered with handles. They looked like security boxes at private banks but once pulled out by the handle, the body freezers were two sizes bigger than the ones used for humans.

Kept in one of these freezers was the Gastrea with the star-shaped mark as seen in the photo found from Dr. Surumi's room...?

Shibata looked down at the paper in his hand while looking for the correct freezer. Rentaro maintained his position while watching Shibata from behind without making a sound. Successfully finding the spot, Shibata looked back and waved to them.

As Shibata pulled the handle hard, a gust of cold air greeted their faces like when opening a fridge.

A rectangular prism, with coffin-like dimensions enough for a person to sleep inside, appeared before their eyes. But once the white cold air dispersed, on that rack was—

"Hmm?"

Nothing at all.

"Huh? That's weird—"

Shibata tensed his face while making a mildly surprised look, then flipping through the information in his binder, he said:

"Oh, you guys were a moment too late. Thirty minutes before you got here, the disposal officer already moved the body out."

"Disposal officer?"

Shibata stared back with a look of exasperation.

"And you guys call yourselves CivSecs? You don't even know about the disposal procedure for Gastrea cadavers?"

"What's wrong with not knowing?"

Rentaro retorted unhappily while the clerk made a slightly scared look.

"Once a Gastrea is found, the first CivSec to defeat it after the alert is sent out gets the reward, right? If it's a perviously unidentified specimen, the Gastrea will be taken for dissection to investigate its weaknesses such as the locations of the heart and the brain. Once dissection is complete, the body is transferred here for temporary storage. Every month, the disposal officer visits this place to transport old cadavers away for cremation. in order to kill the virus in the cadavers, they need to be incinerated thoroughly."

"Cremation? So all the Gastrea corpses moved out of here gets incinerated?"

"99%. A small number are made into preserved specimens or for experiments, so they're not incinerated, but those are exceptions among exceptions. What a shame, you would have made it if you'd got here earlier."

"No way..."

This clue, which was so difficult to find, had reached a dead end. Rentaro could not help but feel stunned.

His mind felt dizzy. If the investigation was forcibly interrupted here, it really would be the end.

"Oh my? But it's really quite weird."

Recalling something, Shibata looked up from her documents with a troubled look.

"Today's not the usual day for moving out Gastrea."

"You mean?"

"Uh, actually I'm not quite sure, but in the past, the disposal officer always transported Gastrea cadavers on a fixed day every month. This morning was an exception. This is the first time that the disposal officer didn't follow the rules. Also, the only cadaver that was taken away was the one you wanted to see."

Exchanging a glance with Hotaru, Rentaro lowered his voice and said:

"Hotaru, that disposal officer..."

"More than likely, part of the same organization as Hummingbird. Otherwise, someone related. No matter who, it can be certain that they're trying hard to destroy evidence."

Conversely, it also proved that if the corpse were to be investigated, it would cause them trouble.

The importance of the Gastrea corpse with the pentagram mark instantly rose up.

"The other side must have realized what we're targeting. Hence, to take action first, they moved the body away even on a weird day that would arouse suspicions. Damn it!"

Hearing Rentaro, Hotaru thought of something and turned to Shibata.

"Hey, Mr. Shibata, does the disposal officer drive a vehicle to pick the body up?"

"Yeah. A truck. It's like the type used for deliveries with a shipping container at the back."

"You said the disposal officer already came today and it was only half an hour ago?"

Shibata nodded again.

"Could you call them to come back?"

Rentaro was stunned.

"Give me that binder."

Hotaru suddenly snatched the binder from Shibata's hands and brought it before Rentaro.

The top piece of paper in the stack was the entry record where Hotaru had signed. Apart from recording times and names, it also included columns for ID numbers and CivSec license verification as well as address, telephone number and other fields. Anyway, it looked like a very official document.

What Hotaru was pointing to was the name "Nagahara Transport" registered half an hour before their arrival.

In other words, Hotaru hoped to contact the Nagahara Transport driver who had gone off somewhere and ask him to drive back.

"But who knows if the telephone number there is real or not?"

"You guys have lost me for a while now..."

Shibata interrupted with a face of suspicion then explained to Hotaru.

"That Nagahara Transport should be the same company as the usual guy. Although I wasn't the one handling it, the staff would have found it very suspicious if a stranger showed up on an unusual date and stopped him from taking the body."

Rentaro crossed his arms.

"But if you call him as suggested, what reason will you use to make him drive the truck back?"

"Well..."

Seeing Hotaru look down, Rentaro was just about to conclude the idea was not going to work when he was struck by another notion.

"Those guys' top priority is probably to retrieve all Gastrea with pentagram marks on them. If we tell them there's another body with a pentagram on it, they'll probably turn back to retrieve it."

"That's it!"

A voice echoed in the narrow space, loud enough to make one want to cover up their ears. Hotaru immediately regained her senses and coughed dryly a couple of times, her face gone red, before adjusting her posture and continuing to speak:

"I believe your idea will work."

Rentaro looked at Shibata.

"I hope you can help us."

Put on the spot, Shibata made an annoyed look.

"What? Why must I help you guys? Lying to trick others is wrong."

"You find yourself with too much free time on the job, right?"

"What? Job? Yeah, being too free is a bit problematic, but it's better than getting worked half dead... What exactly is your point?"

"If you allow that Gastrea to be taken away, it could end up causing a large number of victims. Then there will be a shortage of morgue freezers for humans, even to the point that some will be sent here."

Shibata's expression instantly went stiff.

"What do you mean... exactly...?"

"Please, you'll be doing a favor by not asking too many questions. I don't want to make trouble for you."

The guy hesitated for a while.

"...Fine. I don't get it, but I'll believe you two. But it's really not fun at all to get tricked early in the morning."

Muttering thus, Shibata began to take action swiftly and decisively, totally unlike his earlier slothful look of sleepiness.

Picking up the receiver of his local telephone, Shibata called the number that was registered just now. After one ring, Shibata spoke in a lively manner while looking up at the ceiling.

"Oh, hello, is this Nagahara Transport? Thanks for your services all the time! Oh by the way, about the Gastrea you just took away, yeah, that's right—"

Accompanied by Hotaru, Rentaro left the building. The rain outside had turned even finer into a misty rain, drifting horizontally under the strong winds. Garbage bags flew rapidly across the view, rotating quickly.

According to the weather forecast, the rain was going to fall until night, but it was quite worrying to see it already like this in the morning. Running over to a coffee shop across the road, the two of them ordered the cheapest items.

There were almost no other customers in the coffee shop, so they were able to pick a seat by the window where the morgue was visible. Amidst the view through misty rain, the rat-gray outer walls of the morgue seemed especially desolate, giving off a gloomy atmosphere. Confirming the time, it was currently nine in the morning.

Against the sound of falling rain, the two of them sipped bitter coffee without saying a word. Without nothing left to do, they had no choice but to stare out the window intently.

They had dedicated their full effort to everything they could do.

Just earlier, they had picked a random Gastrea corpse then holding the Gastrea photo found from Dr. Surumi's residence as a reference, Rentaro had drawn a "☆" mark using a permanent marker.

Compared to the photo, of course it was much more crude, but after smudging blood over it as a disguise, it could pass quite convincingly on first glance.

Then all that was left was to wait for the fish to bite.

"This feels kind of like a detective drama."

"What detective drama? You're the criminal, right? This stupidity is insufferable."

Rentaro raised an eyebrow, the corner of his lip shaking.

"I'm not a criminal. It's not like I've been sentenced."

"Pot, meet kettle."

"This girl...!"

"Hmph."

"Hmph!"

Both of them turned their faces away, thus the conversation could not continued. Despite feeling puzzled, Rentaro went for a change of pace by eating his late breakfast. In order to raise his blood sugar, he picked sweet things as much as possible, stuffing food into his stomach in a partially obligatory manner.

It was when he was reaching for the fourth donut, sweet enough to melt one's teeth, a truck branded with the Nagahara Transport logo appeared silently, stopping next to the morgue.

That was most likely the one.

There were two employees apparently. A man dressed in steel-gray work clothes got off and entered the morgue while the other guy waited inside the vehicle.

Rentaro and Hotaru left the coffee shop and circled around without an umbrella by taking the long route.

Hearing the sound of an idle engine, the two of them felt the humid exhaust rushing against their face while approaching from behind. Through the rear view mirror, the driver could be seen smoking while listening to the radio, completely unaware of Rentaro and Hotaru's presence.

Rentaro raised his right hand to stop Hotaru who was glaring at the truck, intending to pounce, thus making her clearly displeased.

"Why? The driver is alone right now."

"We can't be certain they're the enemy yet. First follow them to check out the situation."

Rentaro quietly approached a yellow taxi parking behind the truck then knocked on the window. The apparently napping driver took away the hat originally covering his eyes and turned his sleepy eyes over.

His suspicious eyes wavered due to thinking, in the end, he still decided to open the automatic rear door.

"Where to?"

Rentaro entered the car then pointed to the truck in front.

"The truck in front will be leaving soon. Follow it."

The driver looked back with a surprised expression.

Recalling how a taxi ride had exposed their hiding place yesterday, Rentaro could not help but feel his entire body tensing up.

Rentaro made a random excuse to persuade the driver. Although the driver did not quite accept it, he still placed his hands on the steering wheel and kept his gaze firmly on the truck.

The car's windshield wipers moved left and right regularly, pushing away the rainwater that was making the glass blurry. The water droplets fell slowly from the glass, finally merging with other droplets before falling off all at once.

No one made a sound inside the car.

After a while, the disposal officer walked out with a large stretcher for carrying Gastrea.

That guy came to the back of the truck's container, looked around vigilantly then knocked on the container with deliberately delayed intervals.

The container opened from within and out emerged another disposal officer. Rentaro's heart rate suddenly quickened.

So they had more people inside. But why was there even someone inside the refrigerated container?

Ignoring Rentaro's doubts, the two men cooperated to move the Gastrea from the stretcher into the container. From Rentaro's position, he could not see clearly in the dark interior of the container but there seemed to be a momentary flash of bright light, making him frown.

"Hotaru, did you see that?"

"What?"

"...Nothing, just forget it."

Rentaro could only pray that he had imagined things. If that thing that had flashed into view before disappearing was just as Rentaro thought, this vehicle's culpability would be completely confirmed.

The engine started and the truck slowly drove off. Only after confirming that there was enough distance did the taxi slowly start to follow.

The light rain continued. The wipers moved left and right mechanically like a metronome, echoing emptily inside the car. Everyone gazed ahead with bated breaths.

Despite being a taxi found on the spot, this driver's driving skills could only be described as amazing.

Visibility through the windshield was definitely not good, but the driver followed the quarry without getting too close nor losing the trail. Finally, the vehicles entered a highway.

But just as they passed through the electronic toll collection system, the situation went for a rapid change.

The truck suddenly cut to the right lane and sped up fiercely. Rentaro frantically ordered the taxi driver to accelerate in pursuit, but without warning, the truck slowed down at this time.

The inexplicable phenomenon was making Rentaro frown but he was even more shocked in the next instant.

Very likely, the truck driver had noticed they were being followed and used this method to make the other side expose themselves.

With Rentaro's side getting suckered completely, the disposal officers were surely now completely certain that they were being followed.

In the next instant, the truck sped up again. As though to confirm Rentaro's speculation, this time, the truck accelerated nonstop while it weaved through the traffic in the six-lane highway. All Rentaro could do was watch them recede into the distance.

"We're losing them! Hurry and chase them!"

Rentaro got up to give orders. The sudden acceleration in the next second made him fall back onto his seat.

The engine's roar shook the car's body. As the speedometer surpassed 100 km/h, they were approaching the highway's legal speed limit.

The car's speed was clearly going faster and faster. Seizing openings between the cars ahead, the driver would turn the steering wheel to pass them by scarily close margins.

Moistened by the dense misty rain, the road surface offered reduced tire grip. Any carelessness in steering wheel control would surely cause an accident.

"I-I beg you, stop hurrying me!"

The taxi driver was about to cry too.

The engine emitted a loud rumble as though about to spew out fire. This show of force managed to bring the truck that was almost about to disappear from view back into firing range.

Compared to the enemy pulling the heavy container, Rentaro's side ought to hold an advantage.

Rentaro directed the driver to bring the car parallel to the truck on the left side. His plan was to find an opening to get to the truck's side but the truck suddenly accelerated and approached. The taxi driver hastily slowed down to pull back, narrowly avoiding a tragedy of getting squashed between the container and the railing. Rentaro broke out in cold sweat all over.

But true terror only descended when the thing inside the container doors was suddenly revealed.

Glancing at that object, Rentaro could not help but become dumbfounded. The metal firearm he had glimpsed fleetingly, just as the Gastrea was moved inside, was indeed secured to the floor, now pointing a ferocious muzzle at them.

A Browning M2 heavy machine gun.

This type of machine gun was designed to use powerful .50 anti-materiel rounds and capable of fully automatic fire. Its original purpose was for shooting down aircraft and destroying armored vehicles. Rather than a machine gun, this was a vicious entity that would be better called a "machine cannon." Ordinary staff involved in Gastrea transport should not possess something like that at all.

The enemy organization had apparently considered the possibility of Rentaro figuring out their operation.

Sitting in the container, the disposal officer pulled the massive heavy machine gun's cocking handle into firing position and aimed towards them.

We're dead—transcending logic, Rentaro's sixth sense told him that. Then came the gunshot sound and flash of light.

Accompanied by a great noise, the car began to skid as Rentaro's view spun violently. Without understanding what was going on, Rentaro was thrown. The highway's concrete wall rapid approached from the corner of his eye. Rentaro shut his eyes tightly.

"Rentaro!"

He suddenly felt an impact on his flank, accompanied by a floating feeling as though his entire body was being pushed hard. In the next instant, a terrifying sound of wreckage was heard.

However, Rentaro did not feel the expected pain. Wind brushed across his cheeks while light summer rain was blown horizontally at him. Rentaro could hear his uniform jacket being blown open by the wind.

He opened his eyes slightly to find himself in midair. It turned out that Hotaru Kouro was gritting her teeth, holding him under her arm.

At the very last moment, she had picked him up and escaped the vehicle that was about to be smashed.

Just as he wanted to say thanks, Hotaru interrupted him with an announcement of "We're landing."

Gravity instantly pulled him fiercely downwards. The wet road surface was approaching with lethal speed. Luckily before that could happen, the two of them happened to land on the container of a passing mid-sized truck, rolling over forward a few times to disperse the impact. But due to the wind and rain, the container was very slippery and the two of them almost fell off, only grabbing the edge frantically.

Feeling damage in his semicircular canal, Rentaro tried hard to get a bead on his situation in spite of the dizziness and nausea.

Originally thinking he had fallen on the enemy container, he realized he was wrong.

In front under the misty rain, the enemy truck was passing other cars one by one, swerving left and right as though making a mockery of its pursuers.

Rentaro could not help but look back.

"What happened to the taxi driver?"

"Focus on what's in front! Or else you'll die!"

Rentaro closed his eyes for three seconds in order to calm his emotions then swiftly switched his mood.

"Hotaru, are you able to catch up to the truck if you do it alone?"

"Impossible! The truck is going at 130 km/h!"

On top of the container, the two of them had to scream in order to hear each other clearly. As the wind and rain steadily grew stronger, they were robbed of body heat. Their clothing was all soaked already.

If Enju were here...

Looking ahead, the distance to the enemy truck was continually increasing. The machine gunfire had stopped as well. The enemy's view was likewise obstructed by the rainstorm that was blown horizontal by the wind, hence they probably decided to avoid wasting ammunition unnecessarily. However, once Rentaro and Hotaru found a method to get close, the bullets were naturally going to come flying.

What to do?

"Then Hotaru, could you carry me and jump between cars?"

Hotaru instantly stared wide-eyed at Rentaro. After a moment's hesitation, she nodded and stood up.

"Looks like all we can do is try our best to get close."

Standing straight, she confronted the strong air resistance and heavy rain head on. Rentaro was loaded onto her back while she was almost blown away.

Hotaru first looked back before committing her resolve to jump forcefully. She moved to a black station wagon ahead then jumped onto a sedan that was passing the station wagon. Jumping over vehicles one after another, the two of them chased the enemy truck again.

Rentaro's mind was terribly at ease. The effects of the wind and rain went without saying. Suppose a misstep made them miss a car's roof, the two of them would immediately crash into the ground violently, taking on severe damage.

However, Hotaru's agile movements were always able to seize the right moment to jump consecutively in the nick of time. It would not be an exaggeration to call her skills superb.

Hotaru Kouro possessed outstanding natural talent that was impossible to cultivate in ordinary people.

"I see them!"

From Hotaru's shoulder, Rentaro focused his eyes through the curtain of rain and captured the red taillight.

But this also meant that they had entered the enemy's firing range.

Convinced they had lost their pursuers but seeing them again, the machine gunner made a shocked look then rushed over to the machine gun and swiveled the gun's base.

Nervous tension was making Rentaro's blood vessels contract.

"He's gonna fire!"

Powerful muzzle flash was produced while the Browning machine gun shattered the porous concrete in front of the car as easily as if it were ordinary dirt. Tracing out a destructive trail of bullet marks, the bullets were approaching them.

Hotaru refused to admit defeat. With even more accurate and rapid movements, she jumped from car to car.

The .50 Browning machine gun bullets punctured the hood of the car where Rentaro and Hotaru were just now, causing an explosion an instant later. As though screaming, the car's tires screeched while they skidded.

Hotaru was jumping all over the highway with superhuman skills while the heavy machine gun followed her trail, firing at full blast, turning all her former footholds into scrap metal.

The nonstop gunfire evaporated rain while Hotaru and Rentaro flew between bullet gaps.

A supersonic bullet brushed past Rentaro's cheek. With no choice but to endure the powerful G-forces tormenting him, Rentaro could only grit his teeth and barely suppress the urge to scream.

"The rain of bullets is too dense, it's impossible to get close!"

With the cars that they could jump onto disappearing rapidly one after another, Hotaru was forced into a corner. Swept by the machine gun bullets, the incoming traffic from behind was turning into a hellish scene full of screams.

Rentaro racked his brain, trying to find a solution. Just at this moment, seeing what lay ahead, he felt the blood in his entire body freeze.

"Hotaru, there's a tunnel!"

The entrance to the tunnel passing through a small hill only had a height of 3.5m. The two of them were going to die for sure once jumping from roof to roof on cars was no longer possible.

Everything's over—Just as Rentaro closed his eyes tightly, a comeback method flashed in his mind like a roar of thunder.

"Hotaru, can you run across the tunnel ceiling?"

Hotaru instantly looked back with mouth gaped, but soon understood Rentaro's intent. Resolutely, she looked ahead.

"Only for three seconds. End things before that."

The gradually approaching mouth of the tunnel seemed superimposed with the gaping jaws of a demon laughing manically.

The two of them entered the tunnel with a thunderous sound of wind slicing. The rain curtain was instantly cut off, opening up their view. The machine gun aimed at them. Hotaru only jumped into the air with half a second to spare.

Then the gunshots and an explosive shockwave came flying. Rentaro did not look back. There was no time to look back again.

Without any consideration for Rentaro on her back, Hotaru jumped and stepped on the ceiling. Then she raced forward at ceiling level.

"Rentaro!"

In his upside down view, Rentaro let go of his hands holding onto Hotaru then using an air bronco stance, he suspended himself upside down in the air with only his legs hanging on Hotaru.

With both hands free, he held the Beretta, raising the gun in his upside down view.

Aiming at the vehicle, he took a deep breath while silently closing his eyes—Then he opened his eyes wide and stared.

The artificial eye was released. Turning, the black eye ball showed geometric patterns while undertaking high-speed calculations.

The hem of his jacket was fluttering intensely in the wind, as though expressing Rentaro's anger.

—How dare you harm the innocent populace.

Glaring at the enemy like a demon of vengeance, Rentaro's reckless method of fighting stunned the enemy machine gunner. By the time he managed to suppress his fear and desperately turned the muzzle towards Rentaro, it was already too late.

Rentaro pulled the trigger thrice.

He aimed at the gunner—to his side, the left rear wheel of the truck.

Filled with compressed nitrogen, the tire was punctured by the bullet. In that very instant, the tire pressure leaked outward, causing the tire to burst immediately.

The tilting vehicle caused the steering to lose control as the truck smashed violently into the tunnel's wall on the right.

Although the brakes were hit hard, it was not that easy to regain control when traveling at 120 km/h. The vehicle rolled over and fell without support. Bouncing metallic fragments were spewed out on the road while the vehicle's body rolled over 30m. The gunner was also thrown out of the vehicle, smashing into the ground.

However, firing from his outrageous posture, Rentaro was also struck by the recoil.

An Initiator's light body weight was enough already, but running across a ceiling while shouldering the burden that was Rentaro would be asking for too much.

Feeling a sense of weightlessness while being thrown back in this upside down world, Rentaro's head swiftly approached the asphalt road surface.

Rentaro hastily huddled his body. His shoulder crashed violently into the ground while his entire body bounced like a ball. Intense pain was searing his brain while the impact made him roll many times.

Finally confirming that he had stopped, almost about to vomit amidst his spinning vision, Rentaro endured his trembling body and crawled using his hands on the road, taking stumbling steps towards Hotaru who had been thrown back like him.

"Hotaru! Hey Hotaru!"

Rentaro knelt down to pat her cheek. Hotaru had apparently landed on her head. Lying face up, she was bleeding nonstop from the side of her head, not moving at all.

After calling her countless times, Hotaru finally blinked slowly then her blurry vision captured Rentaro's figure.

"You're such an idiot. I have very powerful self-regeneration and I'm much stronger than you."

Rentaro naturally sighed with relief.

"Idiot... That's not the issue here."

Due to their amazing regeneration, Cursed Children were totally unaware of how serious it was when "young children collapsed from injury."

"Anyway, what about the truck?"

Rentaro realized suddenly and looked back then said to Hotaru, "Let's go over to check." Then picking up the Beretta that had fallen on the road, he carefully approached the truck.

Lying on its side, the truck was blocking the road with cars trapped behind it. Due to the confusion, people were causing a commotion.

Of the disposal officers dressed in work clothes, one of them was bleeding in the head, heavily injured, while the other two had suffered minor blunt injuries. Having witnessed the horrific accident, Rentaro was more surprised that none of them had died. Of the injured, only one of them was still barely conscious, but unable to move due to pain.

Rentaro circled over to the back of the container and found that the two Gastrea corpses kept in the freezers had been tossed out.

—Finally found them.

One of them was the corpse where Rentaro had drawn the fake pentagram while the other was the one shown in the photo found in Dr. Surumi's room.

At a body length of six meters, it was quite spectacular. The long nose was especially conspicuous while there were feathers resembling those of flying creatures. The bulging ribs exhibited a basket-like shape.

Rentaro was unable determine what types of organisms' genes were mixed to produce this result.

"This is the Gastrea that Mr. Kihachi and I defeated a month ago."

Hotaru looked at the Gastrea at her feet with eyes of slight aversion.

This Gastrea was the beginning of the whole commotion.

Due to discovering the star-shaped mark on this Gastrea, Dr. Surumi who was in charge of the autopsy had come across a certain secret. Then like Suibara, she was silenced.

A certain secret held by this Gastrea should have some connection to the Black Swan Project whose details still eluded their grasp. If not, things would be troublesome.

Rentaro firmly put on a pair of latex gloves he had stolen from the morgue. Suppressing his disgust, he searched the corpse's abdomen which showed traces of the operation. A strong sour smell instantly rushed towards him, provoking the mucous membranes of his nasal cavity, making him turn his head away.

But he could not waste too much time here.

The police already knew about the gun fight on the highway, of course. If one were to calculate escape time, it would be best to get things wrapped up within two minutes.

Rentaro continued to reach in, through the latex, his fingertips could feel the slimy abdominal muscles while he pulled out the heart organ from corpse. This was a murky translucent organ similar to a squid's. Near the heart, Rentaro found the "☆" mark he was looking for, then he took out a knife from his waist.

Carefully cutting out a tissue sample the size of a die, he placed it into a film case he had prepared before hand.

Just to be safe, he also took a sample of the skin.

Cells would decay rapidly without appropriate preservation, I'd better hurry and buy some dry ice from a nearby supermarket—Rentaro firmly committed this to memory.

However, there was one more thing that must be done before fleeing the scene.

Rentaro moved over to the driver's seat of the truck. Opening the door, he grabbed the still-conscious disposal officer by the collar and dragged the man out, sitting him on the road.

There were cuts on the guy's face and the chest of his work clothes were stained with blood but those silently glaring eyes were still filled with pure hostility.

"You have nowhere to run."

"Where do you intend to transport this Gastrea?"

The disposal officer did not answer.

"Why does your organization have to retrieve this Gastrea?"

The disposal officer did not answer.

"What is the Black Swan Project?"

"..."

"Hurry and answer, damn it!"

Just as Rentaro angrily raised his fist, someone grabbed his arm.

Hotaru shook her head without saying a word.

"There's no time."

Due to getting too worked up, Rentaro had not noticed but now he perked his ears and heard the faint sound of sirens in the distance.

Rentaro once again glared at the man in work clothes with eyes of hatred.

There were a ton of things he wanted to interrogate the guy about, but there was no way to tie him up and escape together. Damn it!

"Rentaro, where are we going next?"

Rentaro raised the film case and waved it lightly in front of Hotaru, lowering his voice in reply.

"A facility to analyze this Gastrea tissue sample. Although I'm not certain if she's willing to help, at least I have a candidate in mind."

Rentaro then turned his head back and threw the disposal officer one last glance.

"Pass this message along to Hitsuma and Darkstalker. I will surely take back Enju, Tina and Miss Kisara."

Looking straight ahead, Rentaro left the scene together with Hotaru.

Part 4

While feeling the hardness of the stool, Tsurayuki Kimishima kept his mouth firmly shut.

Having stayed silent for three hours already, he kept his gaze downwards the whole time.

Suddenly, someone used their palm to tap the steel table in front of his seat.

"Hey, it's time you spoke up, right? Huh? How much longer are you going to keep this up?"

A detective with a buzz cut and muscular body was making this narrow interrogation room feel even more cramped.

The rain outside was getting stronger while the interrogation room grew stuffy.

Tsurayuki looked up slightly from his work clothes, stained with dirt and blood.

"I will stay silent. Find a lawyer for me. Before that, I won't say anything about the case."

This stubborn attitude ended up fully firing up the detective's rage.

"What's with that attitude of yours! Don't you understand your position? You and your accomplices were firing a machine gun randomly on a highway and killing people. Why do you have a machine gun on your vehicle? Where did you get a hold of that thing? Where were you planning on transporting those Gastrea in your vehicle?"

Seeing Tsurayuki retreat again into his silent shell, the detective's mouth was distorted with anger. This expression was very similar to a sadist's smile.

"It's decided. I will torture you thoroughly before throwing you into the slammer. You won't be breathing the air of freedom for a very long time."

Just at this moment, someone outside knocked twice on the interrogation room's door.

The detective clicked his tongue and grumbled "Who the heck is it?" Standing up from his chair, he greeted the visitor outside.

The detective could be heard saying "No, it's because..." then timidly speaking respectfully.

Just as Tsurayuki was feeling surprised, not knowing what was going on, the conversation at the door continued with "But—", "Well..." before finally ending in silence.

After a while, the person entering the interrogation room was not the earlier detective.

A slightly elongated face, wearing silver-rimmed glasses, a man with facial features giving off an intellectual aura.

Appearing here, he must definitely be a detective but his exact identity was unknown.

Tsurayuki nervously gulped and looked up. The man arriving before him stood still and slowly spread his hands.

"I am here to protect you."

The man curled up the right sleeve of his suit jacket and shirt.

On the detective's arm was a pentagram mark where three of the five tips each had a complicated feathered wing drawn.

Feeling as though an electrical current had pierced his spine, Tsurayuki instantly stood up and saluted to the man.

"Forgive me! I never expected a Three-Winged to come here."

"I am Atsurou Hitsuma. Relax, there are no cameras or eavesdropping devices in this room."

"How are my comrades right now?"

"Being treated at a hospital, but of course, under police supervision. Tell me the whole story."

"Yes! The all-important Gastrea corpse was incinerated at the last moment just before the police arrived. But those guys had already taken a tissue sample..."



"Where do you think they escaped to?"

"They are still trying to track down the project and would probably find a place capable of analyzing the tissue sample. Speaking of the most cutting-edge research facility in the area..."

Hitsuma narrowed his eyes behind his glasses.

"Shiba Heavy Industries?"

Tadashima got off the car and took off his suit jacket to cover his head as a substitute umbrella, rushing into the Magata Police Station under the heavy rain in one breath.

Walking into the familiar interior, Tadashima found his pace quickening spontaneously. Going straight to the large room of the investigation headquarters, he passed through the Criminal Investigations Section door. All detectives had gone off to investigate the Rentaro escape incident, hence the office was empty.

The fact that Rentaro Satomi was still alive had turned the investigations headquarters inside out. Originally about to disband, the investigation headquarters instantly became busy again. Then came the highway incident.

Tadashima met Hitsuma just as he walked out of the interrogation room that Tadashima wanted to visit.

"Superintendent Hitsuma, how is the culprit for the highway shooting incident?"

"Inspector Tadashima, that person will be detained at the MPD headquarters for now."

"What?"

Tadashima hastily complained:

"Stop joking around! The taxi driver is unconscious from severe injuries while four people were shot to death by the heavy machine gun on the back of the truck. Apart from that, there are many people with injuries of varying severity. The hospital taking in these casualties has become something like a field hospital. And we still haven't cleared up what happened exactly. For the sake of the dead and the injured, I must question the criminal even if I have to personally force his lips apart. Please leave this to me."

"Superintendent-General's orders."

Hitsuma's total lack of compromise was wearing Tadashima's patience thin.

"Superintendent Hitsuma, the station chief sees me as a pain in the ass because I frequently ignore orders from above... But right now, what you're doing is obstructing the investigation! What are you and the Superintendent-General planning? Could you please stop making things so difficult for me to trust you guys?"

Without answering, Hitsuma simply stared at Tadashima with cold eyes of derision.

Faced with such a gaze, Tadashima felt an unbridgeable gulf between himself and Hitsuma. He realized that no matter how big of a fuss he made, Hitsuma was not going to change his decision.

Tadashima turned around.

"Our cooperation ends here. Next, I will be going all-out to take care of the case."

"The investigations headquarters decided for us to work as a two-man cell. I will report you if you take action alone."

"You're the one who's been taking action alone from the start. If this rubs you the wrong way, please go ahead and file an anonymous complaint to get me punished."

Without looking back, Tadashima left the police station directly.

Watching him leave, Hitsuma shook his head in exasperation after making sure he was gone.

"Things will get very tricky if we don't take care of him straight away."

Suddenly appearing next to Hitsuma, Darkstalker—Yuuga Mitsugi—was looking at Tadashima sharply with hands in his pockets.

Hitsuma shook his head.

"No, I'll have to take responsibility if my partner gets killed. Just leave that guy alone. Like us, he simply has plans on his own."

Yuuga lowered his guard and shrugged.

"Then what are you planning, Mr. Hitsuma? Hasn't this incident got blown up way too much? Even taking out a machine gun to fire out in public and having three members of the organization captured."

Hitsuma lifted his glasses with his middle finger.

"Don't worry. The two who lost consciousness will die from heart attacks in the hospital. As for Tsurayuki Kimishima, he is set to hang himself at the detention facility after leaving a suicide note. The secret will not leak."

"Completely flawless, that's the idea, right?"

"Indeed. Failures have no future but death."

"If you really intend to eliminate Rentaro Satomi, you should send me."

"I have no intention of changing my decision. Swordtail is more suited to the job than you. Remain on standby."

Yuuga's cold gaze stared at him before he disappeared into the depths of the police station's corridor.

Hitsuma definitely acknowledged Darkstalker's combat ability, but the guy exuded an atmosphere of uncertainty with unknown thoughts.

Compared to someone with an axe to grind, a pure combat machine was more useful.

It was 8pm. Hitsuma stared out the window to see the sky finally calming down after shedding tears nonstop since early morning. The atmosphere of a stuffy night descended upon the earth.

Part 5

The rain stopped. The surroundings were shrouded by darkness. The streetlights nearby illuminated the dark road surface like spotlights.

Leading Hotaru, Rentaro poked his head out from the wall, looking at the vast premises enclosed. More accurately, it was a part of that land.

"So scary."

"It's almost like a samurai residence..."

Encircled by earthen walls that made their appearance in historical dramas, the roof of a three-story residence could be seen faintly.

Or perhaps buying a famous historical site then treating it as a home directly—That was the kind of impression given.

Upon further thought, Rentaro realized that this was his first time visiting despite hearing about the place a long time ago.

—This was the mansion where Miori Shiba, the daughter of Shiba Heavy Industries' CEO, lived.

Apart from supplying all sorts of weapons to the police and the SDF, Shiba Heavy Industries also manufactured various types of the latest electronic products. With the police as their client, under strict measures of confidentiality, this high-tech firm even participated in ballistic calculations, DNA verification and other forensic techniques for solving crimes scientifically. Never did Rentaro expect that Miori lived in a house whose appearance had transcended mere preference for the traditional, instead exhibiting full conservative style.

What Rentaro figured out was that Miori's preference for kimonos did not come from a personal obsession but probably out of family tradition.

Now the problem was how to find Miori and ask for her help amidst the vast premises of her home.

Naturally, now that Rentaro had become a fugitive, obediently pressing the bell at the front entrance to seek entry was not possible. No, instead of putting it that way—

Rentaro looked out along the wall where he was hiding. Soon he found the expected entity and frantically pulled his face back.

"They came as expected."

"Yeah."

A car was parked cleverly near the entrance in an unobtrusive manner. Although it was not colored like a panda in the familiar colors of black and white, the car was most likely sent by the police.

Since there was no way to break through from the front, a detour was the only way.

"Let me go in. Even though it's just an earthen wall, help me climb up."

"I'm going too. If you fail to convince her, all I need to do is abduct that Miori Shiba woman and that will allow me to force them to obey my orders, right?"

"W-What?"

Rentaro looked at her in distraught as Hotaru went hmph.

"To this date, all my enemies have been defeated by me. What I want to emphasize is that holding a gun to their head is the fastest way to make them obey."

"Don't be silly. I'm not handing Miori to someone as dangerous as you."

"I'm the one who hopes that you won't get the wrong idea. I am simply taking the most appropriate action in the most appropriate manner. Since this method is faster, it's for the best."

Rentaro was overcome with an urge to clutch his head.

"Even if Miori doesn't obey your orders, she'll still listen to my request."

"My, how confident you are. Then let's have a contest."

"Hey, stop spouting nonsense—"

Rentaro suddenly found Hotaru wrapping her arm around his waist without warning while fierce acceleration forced his feet to leave the ground. By the time he stood on stable ground again, they were already on top of the earthen wall.

"Get down."

Without knowing what was up, Rentaro followed Hotaru and laid himself down, only to hear the knocking sound of clay. This was due to hitting his belly on the hard tiles that were moistened by rain.

Checking out the Shiba home's vast premises from atop the earthen wall, Rentaro sighed to forget his current situation.

The fires in the regularly spaced stone lanterns illuminated the dark path. In the massive central pond, there was an island with a pavilion built on it.

Various places along the walking path had stone handwashing basins set up. In order to produce a scenery of variation, there were several secondary buildings built at regular intervals scattered from the main mansion.

Almost like a complete specimen of a Japanese garden, this was the Shiba family's residence.

But naturally, aesthetics were not the only aspect that was fulfilled. Security cameras were oscillating left and right at every corner, while what appeared to be patrolling guards could even be spotted.

"Let's have contest to see who can discover Miori Shiba's whereabouts the fastest. Suppose I find the target first, then I'll use my method to coerce her cooperation. After all, our goals are the same."

Before Rentaro could stop her, Hotaru had already gotten up and was running silently over the clay tiles.

Rentaro felt very helpless.

After all, theirs was a weak and temporary relationship of alliance between an avenger and a framed CivSec. Any disagreement in opinion would end up like this.

As long as Hotaru's thoughts were focused wholly on revenge, in order to achieve that goal, she did not care no matter how much she trampled upon other people's wills or dignity.

Rentaro began to find more and more that the girl cooperating with him was extremely tough to handle.

At the same time, he was certain that Miori could not be handed over to Hotaru.

But that being said, Rentaro had no idea where Miori might be. His thoughts coming to an impasse, he had no choice but to observe the mansion from the earthen wall again. The current time was 8pm. Judging by common sense, Miori should be having dinner at the main mansion or preparing for a bath.

In terms of probability, as much as he felt reluctant, Rentaro decided that Hotaru's decision to charge ahead to the main mansion was the correct one.

Speaking of which, Rentaro recalled how Miori had often mentioned in the past how she was always busy with supplementary lessons and practicing various arts. In his memory, this was quite a rare reaction for the laid back Miori who seldom complained.

Not only private tutoring but also Japanese traditional dance, the Japanese zither as well as archery. Adhering to her parents' will, Miori's personal time for rest was virtually sucked dry. She probably could not help but grumble under this sort of pressure.

—Archery?

Rentaro suddenly came to a realization then examined the premises again. Soon he found his target.

Having seen the main mansion's stateliness, there was a crude building that one would mistake for a stable. Looking at it from here, things resembling archery targets seemed to be placed in the depths of the crude building. Due to the excessive distance, Rentaro could not be certain even after staring intently with his eyes focused.

After a moment's hesitation, Rentaro nodded.

The earthen wall was roughly 8m from the ground. He moved forward with his bottom against the top of the wall, reaching a gentle edge which required a bit of courage to jump down, his legs dangling in midair.

But at this moment, he slipped on the wet tiles. It was too late to find a hand hold in his panic. Feeling as though someone had kicked him flying, there was a sense of floating like stepping on air and before he had time to feel afraid, the dark ground was fast approaching.

Rentaro landed on both legs. The powerful impact went straight to his brain up his spine. Landing with some difficulty without falling on his bottom, he then found a dense shadow covering his head, so he reached up with both hands just in time to catch the falling object. The tile that had fallen down together with Rentaro was deprived of the chance to alert people of intruders with the sharp sound of breakage and now seemed to be protesting silently.

Trespassing in this awkward manner, it would be utterly shameful if Rentaro were to be caught.

Just at this moment, animal growls were coming from somewhere close, freezing Rentaro on the spot.

Only then did Rentaro recall that he still had yet to spot animals that ought to have appeared along with security cameras and patrolling guards.

Cold sweat dripping, he looked at the source of the sound. As expected, it was staring at him.

Covered in thick red-brown fur, bearing a fierce expression. On top of the wedge-shaped head, the upright ears had undergone a cropping procedure. A fierce gurgling growl.

—A Doberman Pinscher.

The Shiba home's watch dog.

Guards were going to arrive soon. There was no time to waste here.

To entice his opponent to pounce, Rentaro deliberately bent down to bait the Doberman into attacking. As expected, the doberman lunged for his throat with a growl.

Once the target was known, evasion was an easy task. Just as the Doberman brushed past, Rentaro also struck downwards forcefully with a karate chop, easily dispatching his opponent.

Dragging the totally limp dog, Rentaro hid inside a neighboring forest. As though on cue, a guard hurried on scene.

Rentaro held his breath. From the shade of the bushes, he peered out. When a flashlight swept across him momentarily, he kept blinking.

Turning his head, trying hard to check his surroundings, the guard finally sighed. As though finding his behavior shameful, he muttered "let's head back" before disappearing from Rentaro's view.

Exhaling the breath he had been holding and patting his chest in relief, Rentaro felt that he had survived the crisis for now. In order to avoid getting caught by the security cameras, he used the rows of pine trees to hide himself while taking a long roundabout path to the archery range.

The stone lanterns were giving a sweet and sour smell like burning canola oil. Tongues of flame flickering in the wind altered Rentaro's shadow slightly, giving him a sense of warmth.

A great banquet was probably being held at the main mansion. The wind brushing against his face was carrying faint sounds of cheering and elegant music to his ears.

Circling a round the edge of the pond, he peeked out from behind a rock. When the archery range finally came into view, he could heard a light thud, the sound of an arrow piercing the target.

Someone was inside.

Pushing aside the cold reeds glistening with rain drops, Rentaro lowered his stance and cautiously approached the back of the archery range.

Then again came the sound of something slicing through the air and piercing the target fiercely.

Rentaro's eyes had grown used to the darkness and he could clearly see the girl's conspicuous figure, dressed in a white archery uniform.

The girl gracefully relaxed her stance from drawing the bowstring against her chest guard. Even the beads of sweat on her face were so beautiful.

However, the girl across the darkness was showing a gloomy expression. She seemed to be firing arrows in an attempt to vent her frustrations.

"My, you're still so diligent in such hot weather."

"Who is it?"

To show his harmless intent, Rentaro raised both arms and approached her.

Even the sky was dark, the archery range was not illuminated. However, the girl turned her eyes, already used to the dark, towards Rentaro.

He heard a gasp of surprise.

"My dear Satomi? Is that really you...?"

"Do I look like a fake?"

Naturally, Rentaro expected Miori to use a teasing tone of "Visiting so late, could this be a night assault? That's so naughty~~ What shall I do?" as usual.

But with the sound of wind slicing, something stabbed next to Rentaro, causing him to halt in surprise.

Slowly turning his head, he found the duralumin shaft of the arrow quivering in front of his nose.

Pulling the bowstring so taut that it was almost about to break, Miori murmured in a tremble.

"I heard you were dead... Do you know how worried I was?"

Rentaro suddenly felt ashamed of his recklessness. After all, the news had reported how Rentaro had died in the incident at the Magata Plaza Hotel.

Judging from her gloomy face from afar, could it be that...

"Sorry I made you worry."

Miori's lowered eyes showed sorrow.

"My dear Satomi... Did you really kill the victim?"

"No!"

Rentaro hastily denied then shook his head helplessly.

"Perhaps you don't believe me but I was framed. Could you give me time to explain?"

Miori urged Rentaro to continue with a speechless attitude. Hence, Rentaro picked the main points and recounted what had happened so far in a simple manner. This included the puzzling request, the client's murder, himself getting arrested, then the escape. Also how someone else was helping him and they were working together to uncover the mysterious content of the Black Swan Project.

After listening to him, Miori became much more relaxed in expression.

"I knew it, you're not a murderer."

Hands in his pockets, Rentaro pouted and said:

"That goes without saying."

"Hey, did you know? I heard that Kisara is getting married soon."

Rentaro felt as though the side of his head had been struck by a hammer.

—Miss Kisara getting married?

"With who?"

"Apparently a policeman called Hitsuma."

That guy—

Rentaro instantly felt filled with rage, his view almost going blood red. He should have guess this possibility.

Rentaro had originally that the enemy had Enju, whose corrosion rate was fast increasing, taken away by the IISO for detainment, framed Tina and forced Tendo Civil Security to disband in fear of the Initiators' astounding power, but he was totally wrong.

"I received no response no matter how many times I called or texted Kisara. What is going on, my dear Satomi?"

Imagining Hitsuma laying his filthy hands on Kisara, Rentaro suddenly wanted to vomit.

He lowered his head and closed his eyes. His fist kept shaking.

—Miss Kisara...

I miss you so much. I really want to drop everything and just rescue Enju and Tina, to hold them in my arms, as well as saving Miss Kisara to apologize for saying such mean things to her, to bring everything back to the way it was—

"I—"

"—You two seem quite occupied."

Hotaru appeared spontaneously on the archery range's roof. Dropping down from the eaves, she walked over to Miori.

"Who is it this time?"

"I am Hotaru Kouro. Due to certain reasons, I am currently taking joint action with that person over there."

Making a look as though she did not want to explain too much, Hotaru stared at Rentaro.

"I never expected the archery range."

"Hmph, I found Miori first, so don't you dare lay a hand on her."

Hotaru raised both hands and closed her eyes, shaking her head with a helpless look.

"What on earth happened? Are you actually moving about with this girl in company...?"

After thinking silently for a while, Rentaro turned towards Miori again.

"Miori, thank you for telling me about Miss Kisara's upcoming marriage. However, I can't intervene right now."

Rentaro took out a cold object from his waist pocket and brought it front of Miori. The bottom of the film case had been filled with dry ice with a ventilation hole opened up on top.

"There are a certain Gastrea's cells inside here. I'm sure it's a clue to the case, so I hope you can lend us equipment for analyzing it."

Rentaro gripped the black Benz's steering wheel while his body squirmed uncomfortably, secured by the safety belt. The unfamiliar task of driving was making him tense all over.

Recalling the procedures from driving school, he confirmed the sign while stepping on the gas pedal with unnatural movements. After all, it was his first time ever driving such an expensive car so telling him not to be nervous was asking for the impossible.

"Does a CivSec license include driving a car?"

Sitting in the front passenger seat, Miori asked in shrill tone.

"Don't speak to me. I won't be responsible if an accident occurs."

Suddenly poking her head out from the back seat, Hotaru explained:

"Apart from tanks and fighter jets, Promoters are allowed to operate any vehicle. On the other hand, the Initiator license offers no benefits apart from the rationing of corrosion inhibition medication."

"Oh my, how convenient. I should take the exam to get a license too—"

Staring ahead, Rentaro scoffed.

"As if the CivSec license is that easy to take."

Having changed into a kimono, Miori opened her fan, fluttering it lightly while covering her mouth.

"Oh my, I get the impression that 'seeing as my dear Satomi passed the exam, I shouldn't have any problem at all.'"

"Hmm."

"I agree. If someone like Rentaro can get the license so easily, there must be a problem."

"Are you two trying to pick a fight?"

"Oh, turn right over there."

Rentaro hastily turned the steering wheel to follow Miori's directions, making the turn precariously.

"By the way, where are you going?"

"Shiba Heavy Industries' headquarters."

Blocked by a red light, the traffic quietly decelerated. Checking the rear view mirror as matter of habit, Rentaro checked to see they were being followed.

When setting off from the Shiba home by car, in order to handle the detective stationed at the front door, as a red herring, they had asked the Shiba family's chauffeur to drive the luxury sedan that Miori used for commuting to school.

After confirming that the detective had followed the bait, Rentaro, Miori and Hotaru had left on this Benz. It should have worked in theory but it was best not to be careless.

Rentaro keenly scanned the neon-lighted night scenery flowing past outside the window. Catching sight of an electronic clock, he saw that the time read almost 10pm.

Opposite the brightly lit streets, a building appeared, towering above all the others.

Rentaro would have expected all company staff to have left after work at this late an hour, but many windows were still bright from lights. Clearly some employees were still working overtime.

Miori seemed to read Rentaro's mind and murmured: "There are people working at my family's firm at all times, twenty-four hours a day."

"The entire building is owned by Shiba Heavy Industries?"

"Yes."

"Looks quite profitable."

Rentaro was planning to make a snide remark but Miori brought her kimono sleeve up to her lips and smiled subtly.

"Indeed, the weapons sold by my family's firm are very profitable. Regrettably, they will continue to be profitable. After all, the current world is filled with dangers."

"Selling all these killing weapons, don't you feel anything?"

"We also sell the bulletproof equipment and armored vehicles for resisting these weapons."

This sort of behavior was like acting and directing in the same performance—Rentaro's words dissipated before he could try to point out the problem with her statement.

Conversely, what exactly was his own behavior?

Carrying a gun in the name of eradicating Gastrea, even keeping explosive cartridges in his body, Rentaro was a taboo creation of Shiba Heavy Industries, shunned by the world.

The car drove into the parking lot in front of Shiba Heavy Industries. Rentaro noticed a structure resembling a guard station.

Stationed there, the guard initially frowned at the car visiting in the middle of the night until Miori lowered the tinted window as waved with a smile. Only then did the guard reply "Excuse me! Please enter" while maintaining an upright and stationary posture.

Slowly driving into the premises of Shiba Heavy Industries, Rentaro could not help but gape his mouth.

At the entrance and in front of the main building, security personnel resembling some kind of special assault team could be found all over the place with battle gear stamped with the Shiba Heavy Industries logo and standing with assault rifles.

This unbelievable force was akin to a private army. Besides, judging from their postures, it was evident that every single one of them was an experienced veteran.

"The security here is even tighter than your home's."

Miori smiled glamorously as though she had been praised.

"As I've mentioned, the world isn't quite peaceful after all. In case of an emergency, these people can also substitute for police and civil security by helping to suppress Gastrea incidents in the area. They are outfitted from head to toe with Shiba Heavy Industries equipment and can serve as the best advertisements for the firm."

"I see."

Rentaro controlled the steering wheel while observing those people. What looked like bulletproof vests at first glance were actually the latest models of Shiba Heavy Industries' strength-enhancing exoskeletons.

Apart from protecting the joints, they could also augment muscle strength to 180%, obtaining excellent results in shock absorption and penetrative power. Definitely elite world-class equipment.

Rentaro felt dizzy after counting the number of zeroes in the catalog prices. Apparently, this was standard issue equipment for security personnel within Shiba Heavy Industries.

Miori stared at Rentaro with glimmering cat-like eyes filled with curiosity.

"My dear Satomi, you probably can beat these people if you were serious, right?"

Rentaro silently shook his head.

If such well-trained people with astounding firepower were to attack all at once, there was no way for Rentaro to hold them off.

The car arrived directly at the main building's entrance. Miori got off gracefully. On the other hand, Rentaro only alighted after putting on sunglasses and gloves for disguise as Hotaru followed.

The ground floor was entirely surrounded by glass. There were many guards here, causing Rentaro's heart to beat rapidly.

Although Miori had agreed to help them, her family firm's employees were naturally not Rentaro's allies.

While feeling the guards' surprised gazes sweep over him, Rentaro could not help but feel nervous.

"What brings you here so late tonight, Miss Miori?"

"Hmm, a bit of stuff to do. Is there anyone using the analysis lab in the third floor basement?"

The man at the reception scanned the details through a glasses terminal for a while before answering: "No, all colleagues have left."

"Is that so? Then I'll go downstairs for a bit. Also, these two are my friends."

Keep up the good work—Miori waved glamorously while Rentaro and Hotaru followed her without making a sound.

Rentaro felt gazes behind them as he entered the elevator and pressed the button for the third floor basement. Only after the elevator doors closed did Rentaro exhale the breath he had been holding. Taking off his disguise, he asked:

"Probably not discovered yet, right?"

Miori showed a mischievous expression.

"Who knows. Isn't it quite bizarre to wear sunglasses at night?"

Hotaru looked up at Miori.

"Miss Miori, won't your family object to you coming to the firm so late at night?"

"Oh my, I can't believe little Hotaru is calling my name directly."

Miori brought her fist to her chest in a pride motion.

"But you need not worry. I do this often, such as coming over alone at night to adjust gun designs or the like."

The door opened with the sound of the elevator arriving at its destination. It was dark outside and felt stuffy with the air conditioning apparently switched off. However, judging from the loudness of their footsteps, the ceilings should be quite tall.

"Welcome, my dear Satomi."

Miori waved her ID in front of an electromagnetic device, causing a bright light to strike Rentaro's eyes without warning, making him raise his right hand to block his face and narrow his eyes.

The lighting ahead all activated, towards the room's deep end. Once the entire floor was revealed under the lights, Rentaro was once again shocked by the spaciousness of this place.

The inside was almost like a laboratory. A room isolated by reinforced glass, filled with test tubes, beakers and other experimental apparatus. Rentaro could still barely recognize the centrifuge. As for that giant box-like object, it was probably a DNA sequencer or something like that.

Miori also opened up the gun manufacturing area for Rentaro to tour. It felt like a factory but was cleaner and more high tech than most factories.

"My dear Satomi, please give me the sample you want analyzed."

"You're going to operate it personally? Are you for real?"

Pulling out the metal fan from her chest, Miori opened it and fanned with pride.

"What a silly question. There is no equipment on these premises that I don't know how to use."

While praising her in his heart, Rentaro took out the film case containing the Gastrea tissue sample and placed it on Miori's hand.

"I'm counting on you."

"Leave it to me."

Miori winked adorably.

Watching her leave, Rentaro once again muttered in his heart, "I'm counting on you."



Part 6

"What did you say!?"

The blanket jumped as though flying while the surrounding detectives looked over with expressions of puzzlement.

However, Shigetoku Tadashima pressed the cellphone hard against his ear, completely unfazed by other people's gazes.

On the other side was his subordinate—Yoshikawa—speaking in a strange tone of voice due to awkwardness. He sounded like he was pleading with Tadashima.

'I'm sorry, I lost the Shiba Heavy Industries heiress. I was originally on guard at the entrance to her home. Seeing the usual luxury car she traveled on, I followed it but the car stopped in front of Magata High School where she's enrolled but no one got off. Only when I secretly looked inside the car did I realize we were tricked completely... Then—'

Tadashima hung up without waiting for Yoshikawa to finish. Picking up a shirt that was hanging on the side, he ran out of the lounge while putting it on.

This was undoubtedly Rentaro Satomi's doing. However, where did he want to take the Shiba Heavy Industries heiress? Unless Tadashima figured this out, even if he went on a random search...

"Hold on a sec!"

Hearing an emotional cry behind him, Tadashima looked back to see a young policewoman approaching angrily, circling around to block him from the front.

"Have you even slept lately? At least catch a little sleep."

"The criminal is not going to wait for me to wake up before taking action!"

"You won't last if this continues, right? Please be mindful of your age."

"What kind of detective lets this get in the way of work!?"

Frightened by the furious Tadashima, the policewoman yielded the path. Suddenly struck by a doubt, he looked at the policewoman's face.

"Hey, I recall that the equipment used by the police also comes from Shiba Heavy Industries, right?"

Tadashima's sudden question made the policewoman's panicking expression instantly lose steam, but she still went "Yes, indeed..." in response while thinking with her chin against her hand.

"Apart from providing weaponry, they also take on a portion of the forensic lab's jobs. Analyzing ballistics and perform blood tests and DNA verification are all part of their areas of responsibilities—"

"—That's the one!"

"Huh?"

"Well done. The location is the headquarters of Shiba Heavy Industries. Find as much a backup as possible and send them there. I'm heading out first."

Placing his hands on the stunned policewoman's shoulders to praise her, Tadashima then turned around and rushed out of the Magata Police Station.

Why did Rentaro Satomi and his accomplice attack people who were transporting Gastrea? Undoubtedly, they were taking a sample to analyze somewhere.

Speaking of which, the speculation that they were on the run with a purpose gained further credibility.

Turning the key inside his car, Tadashima floored the gas pedal.

Pouring the reagent into a beaker in the lab, Miori began to operate the analysis apparatus in deft manner, but a layman would not be able to understand how far her task had progressed.

Unable to help, Rentaro could only walk over to the staircase to keep a bead on the indoor situation of the Shiba Heavy Industries building.

Having confirmed the emergency staircase's location, he pulled the metal door open and climbed the dark steps. While the soles of his struck the stone slabs, making knocking sounds, Rentaro's thoughts were sent flying elsewhere.

He had been attacked by Hummingbird at one point.

The hideout that was thought to be very safe had been discovered. The enemy's tracking abilities were quite impressive.

It was very well possible that right this moment, the enemy's grasp was secretly circling around towards his back...

—Don't be silly.

To drive away that doubt, Rentaro shook his head and looked at the sign to see he had reached the ground floor.

Running into the earlier guards would be bad. Just as he was going to look back, a breaking sound compelled him to stop walking.

This familiar sound was actually that of gunshots.

Pressing his ear against the emergency door, he felt the metal's cold texture against his ear. Shots could be heard on the other side again. This time, he was certain that they were coming from the small-caliber high-speed bullets of assault rifles.

The gunfire continued intermittently with the sound of glass breaking mixed in. The noise of a chaotic battle along with what seemed like screaming, all sound finally ceased.

Rentaro's palm was all covered with cold sweat.

Silently, he opened the door.

The strong stench of blood coming from the gap in the door made him terrified.

He committed himself to opening the door completely.

He could not help but groan.

"What is going on...?"

Straight in front of Rentaro's position, a security guard was sitting on the floor with his head hung, his posture looking like he was napping.

In actual fact, the guy's neck was cut by a sharp instrument. Spurting out of his neck, the blood made the wall its canvas, producing avant-garde artwork of extremely poor taste.

The furniture in the building had all fallen over, with corpses dragged on the floor and bullet marks left behind. Apart from that were the numerous corpses of security troops. Some had their necks twisted and broken by force, while others had legs bent in weird angles. Some even had their limbs severed.

The lights on the entire floor were off with only a night light illuminating the receptionist's seat at the counter like a spotlight. Then man who had received Rentaro's group earlier was sitting with his back to him.

Rentaro took a closer look and found a dark puddle at the base of the chair as though someone had gone incontinent.

Raising his Beretta, Rentaro spun the chair to face himself. The receptionist's head was looking upwards and had been split apart vertically. His eyes were staring wide and filled with terror, forever frozen in that moment.

Checking the man's pulse, Rentaro shook his head.

"How could this have happened...?"

The security troops, numbering almost twenty, were completely wiped out?

His throat felt parched. Finally forcing that nervous tension down his throat, Rentaro desperately tried to maintain composure.

Just at that moment, a scream came from afar amidst the sound of assault rifle gunfire.

The front yard of Shiba Heavy Industries could be seen through the glass wall. A single remaining security guard was shooting his assault rifle wildly with fully automatic fire. The guy had clearly lost his mind severely.

"Hey!"

Hearing Rentaro's yell, the security guard screamed "Eeeeeeeek!" and turned the muzzle towards him.

Rentaro frantically hid under the reception counter and covered his ears. The main entrance instantly shattered into fragments flying everywhere. Even the light ahead was shot, plunging the whole surroundings into darkness all at once.

"Hold on! I'm not an enemy."

Rentaro raised his hand up from the counter and waved to show he was not hostile. Making sure it was safe, Rentaro then poked his head out.

The other guy finally got the message and ran towards Rentaro.

"H-Help me!"

"What happened?"

Clutching his head in both hands, the security guard spoke with his face fully distraught.

"No idea. My friend next to me was suddenly pulled up and suspended in midair, then sliced in the head, spurting blood. I can't understand at all what happened next."

"What are you talking about...?"

"Don't ask me!? I wanna know too!"

At this point, the security guard went into panic again so Rentaro placed his hand on the guy's shoulder to calm him.

While encouraging him to speak, Rentaro finally learned that the guy's colleagues were all killed inexplicably, pierced by blades or having their necks broken. It was like an invisible man did it.

This could only be described as an unbelievable emergency. Were it not for the scene of carnage and rivers of blood, Rentaro would probably have doubted the security guard's sanity.

Undoubtedly, this was done by the organization tracking him and Hotaru down.

Those people had unleashed another grim reaper.

Hummingbird, who had killed Kenji Houbara, was already eliminated.

There were two left.

The one who had killed Giichi Ebihara was surely Darkstalker, specialized in sniping—in other words, Yuuga Mitsugi. That guy was still hiding out of sight but methods of brute force like breaking necks here was not his style.

Saya Takamura's killer was still unknown. The attacker here could very well be that person.

"Anyway, I need to take Miori and escape this building. That way should be the backdoor, right?"

The security guard made a look as though he only recalled the backdoor's existence now. Without looking back, he fled in that direction.

"H-Hey, wait up!"

The security guard yelled while looking back at Rentaro.

"I'm escaping! How could anyone stay in this hell hole!?"

But in the next second, something unbelievable happened.

In the middle of running, the guy was suddenly skewered together with his strength-enhancing exoskeleton by a large knife that had suddenly appeared from thin air. With a stabbing sound, the man's body was lifted up.

"Gah... Ah...!"

The inexplicable phenomenon was leaving Rentaro dumbfounded. What the heck was going on?

There was only air behind the knife. As though acting on its own, the knife was stabbed into the security guard's chest.

No way, was he killed by a ghost?

"M-Monster...!"

Suspended in the air, the guard was struggling like mad, his shoes kept kicking forward. Just at that instant, the background definitely flickered there.

Like noise in a digital image, the scenery was wavering. Electronic noise shaped like a human appeared for an instant before vanishing.

Someone was there. As one would expect, someone was holding the knife that stabbed the guy. And that someone was very tall and muscularly built.

Could it be—?"

Rentaro only knew of one type of equipment that could physically achieve this kind of mysterious phenomenon.

"Optical camouflage...?"

Despite muttering to himself, Rentaro still had trouble believing.

The ability to distort light, allowing an object to meld into the background—Through cutting-edge technology, it was possible to create an "invisible man."

Finding there were people attempting to escape at the backdoor, the enemy had turned himself transparent immediately to lie in wait for his prey.

This guy had wiped out Shiba Heavy Industries' elite troops.

Suspended in midair, the guard vomited a large amount of blood before becoming motionless.

Seeing the guard's body thrown aside, Rentaro felt the invisible man turning towards him. He could sense the powerful killing intent exuded from the enemy.

Rentaro's breathing quickened. Staying here any longer would be too dangerous.

Kicking up the assault rifle at his feet, Rentaro readied it to enter firing position. Using his thumb to switch the weapon to fully automatic mode, Rentaro opened fire.

Accompanied by intense muzzle flash, the corridor's wall was struck by bullets, producing great noise while the wall was penetrated.

The bullets were depleted in merely two seconds. No blood on the floor. Rentaro had missed.

Instantly throwing the rifle away, Rentaro began to flee.

Running back the way he came, Rentaro was almost scrambling and rolling down the stairs.

Opening the third floor basement's door violently with something like a body slam, Rentaro chanced upon Hotaru and Miori while they were reading a piece of paper together and looked back at him.

"My dear Satomi, the analysis results for the Gastrea cell sample are out."

"Forget about that for now. The enemy's here. A troublesome guy."

Hotaru's eyes instantly narrowed.

"Where?"

"Not sure. But anyway, staying here will be very dangerous."

Rentaro then turned to Miori.

"Miori, that VR training facility I used last time is still on the fifth floor basement, right? Lend it to me for a while."

"VR training facility?"

Hotaru's question made Rentaro pause.

"Yeah. It's cube-shaped space that's crazy huge and can simulate all kinds of scenery for battling against virtual opponents. I'm going to engage the enemy there."

Hotaru nodded lightly and seemed to understand with just Rentaro's simple explanation.

Rentaro then faced Miori again.

"The enemy is targeting us two, so why don't you head to another room to help us control the VR equipment. Make sure you lock the door down completely to prevent intruders."

"Understood. The analysis results and explanations are on this sheet of paper. I'll leave it in Hotaru's safekeeping so that she can explain the details to you once things calm down."

"Yeah."

Rentaro pressed the elevator's button and pushed the reluctant Miori into the elevator by her shoulder.

"Don't you dare die, my dear Satomi."

"I seem to have died once already, so there's no way I want to experience that again."

Rentaro nodded to express his gratitude and determination. The elevator doors closed.

"Let's go, Hotaru."

Glaring at the floor resolutely while running, Rentaro sped down the stairs, three steps at a time, swiftly glancing at the fifth floor basement's sign before rushing inside.

Having borrowed two Shiba Heavy Industries assault rifles from the lobby, Rentaro tossed one of them to Hotaru.

He pushed open the main entrance which was equipped with a card reader on the side. Although he already expected it beforehand, Rentaro still had to raise his hands to shield his eyes from the blinding brightness.

Inside was a space so pure-white that it was impossible to discern the exact boundary between the floor and the walls. A single speck of dust could not be found on the empty floor.

Transcending reality, this space was filled with a strong surreal sense. Everyone witnessing it for the first time would probably be left speechless.

Having taken a step to confirm the floor, Rentaro waved to Hotaru who was dumbfounded as expected, walking through the vast space.

Just at this moment, a distortion suddenly appeared in this pure white space. After the whole world seemed to spin momentarily, the scenery before their eyes instantly changed dramatically to become the polar opposite.

So dark. Dust filled the musty and humid air. Nailed shut with wooden boards, the windows did not let any light inside. There was also the smell of rust and rotting wood. This was probably a long abandoned facility.

Inside this space with a very high ceiling, Rentaro noticed it was a warehouse.

"W-Where is this place?"

Hotaru was extremely unsettled. Rentaro explained to her as calmly as he could.

"This stage is called the 'Warehouse.' This is what's amazing about this simulated combat training facility. It can instantaneously change into a space like this."

Switching to this stage was probably part of Miori's plan as well.

"This is virtual?"

Rentaro left Hotaru alone while she carefully touched a wooden crate. Pulling out a pen-shaped flashlight from his back pocket, he shone it left and right, revealing a large number of square crates piled up randomly in the darkness. Covered with thick dust, the crates seemed to be silently protesting against someone disturbing their peace. Rentaro's illumination produced a ring-shaped light on the wall of the unexpectedly deep interior. This place was roughly as vast in area as a factory.

Resting his rifle on top of a nearby crate, Rentaro set up the bipod. With the muzzle pointing to the entrance that the two of them entered just now, he aimed using the optical scope.

With simple instructions, Rentaro taught Hotaru how to operate the assault rifle.

"Listen carefully. The enemy will come in after the door opens. The guy is an invisible man who's using optical camouflage. As soon as the door opens, fire even if you don't see the enemy."

"Understood."

Cropped to a circular boundary by the scope, Rentaro's view had a red dot in the center, shaking slightly together with the light vibrations from Rentaro's hands.

A faint metallic sound finally came from the other side of the door.

Rentaro's heart was pounding loudly.

He narrowed his eyes slightly and placed his finger on the trigger while releasing the safety. The door opened slightly.

"Hotaru!"

Fully automatic fire. The door was riddled with holes like a beehive. The blinding muzzle flashes and gunshot continued nonstop.

Depleting all the bullets in one breath, Rentaro and Hotaru ran out almost simultaneously. After a brief silence, a figure behind the door fell down inwards together with the door.

Rentaro gestured with his hand to Hotaru then approached after drawing the gun from his waist.

The backlit outline slowly grew clearer. Perhaps because the optical camouflage was damaged or released, the person looked like a physical body.

Coming close then kicking lightly, Rentaro confirmed the guy was unresponsive before turning the body over. Then he was frozen due to shock.

Turning his head back, Rentaro yelled:

"Not this guy, Hotaru! The enemy is still alive!"

Dressed in only a shirt and trunks, the thirty to thirty-five-year-old man was the security guard who had lost his life earlier.

The enemy had thrown this guy's corpse against the door to bait Rentaro's side into firing.

"—I finally found you, New Human. I am Swordtail."

Rentaro heard a voice from behind.

Twisting his upper body to look back, Rentaro saw the knife swinging down towards him from midair.

"Cra—"

The downwards knife stabbed into Rentaro's chest and pierced his heart—Just as this hallucination flashed in his mind, a shot rang out. The knife was sent flying by the bullet, sliding away on the floor in the warehouse.

It came from Hotaru's covering fire.

Rentaro ducked while Hotaru continued to shoot continuously with her dual pistols.

The warehouse's wall was hollowed out. But in this very short time, the enemy's figure vanished once more.

Just as Rentaro felt Hotaru wrapping her arms around his waist, he immediately felt intense acceleration as though he had been blown away.

Deciding it would be dangerous to stay there, Hotaru had taken a mighty leap.

"How do you propose we defeat that kind of guy!?"

"I'm only starting to think about that problem now!"

Landing in the middle of the warehouse, Rentaro stood back to back with Hotaru and called out to the unknown darkness.

"You're Saya Takamura's killer, bastard!"

"Ho, seeing how you're still alive even after knowing this much, I can see why the organization desperately wants you found."

The voice was echoing all over the warehouse, making it difficult to pinpoint the source.

Rentaro spoke while desperately organization information about the enemy in his mind.

The enemy was invisible but the knife could be discerned by the naked eye.

This meant that the enemy was wearing something like a camouflage cloak, only exposing the weapon in his hand when intending to attack.

But erasing footsteps and breathing was not possible. Supposing the enemy did not possess other close range weapons apart from the knife, it would be possible to figure out his location through signs of his presence. But if he still had something like a gun, the situation would be completely different.

That being said, was this Swordtail guy actually...

"You must be thinking about this, right? How exactly am I applying optical camouflage to my entire body?"

"..."

"Just as Darkstalker replicates Sumire Muroto's Model 21 Varanium Eye whereas Hummingbird replicates Ayn Rand's Shenfield, I have also inherited the Mariott Injection power of mechanized soldiers. My skin is embedded with nanomaterials allowing light to be refracted at will. This is the ultimate mechanized soldier ability developed by Arthur Zanuck after overcoming many obstacles."

"What!?"

Arthur Zanuck—Rentaro had heard this name before. Like Sumire, he was one of the so-called Four Sages.

What on earth was going on? Hidden behind the New World Creation Plan, could it possibly be—

Inside the labyrinthine mess of storage containers, Rentaro looked around cautiously, finding no trace of the enemy. The warehouse had become all quiet despite the possibility of battle breaking out any time. Rentaro could not sense any presence at all. All the cells on the surface of his skin were standing on end, keen as radars, refusing to miss even the sound of a pin's drop on the floor.

"Useless."

The enemy's presence suddenly appeared behind him, causing goosebumps all over Rentaro's back.

Appearing suddenly out of nowhere, the killer aimed his gun straight at Rentaro's temple.

Rentaro moved reflexively and deflected the gun away from his face just before the enemy pulled the trigger. With a deafening gunshot, the bullet whizzed past his temple, leaving a burning sensation.

Hitting the ground, rolling then getting up swiftly, Rentaro tried to aim his gun at the enemy who had just fired at him. But the opponent had already disappeared.

"If you did research on me, shouldn't you understand by now?"

Filled with pity, the voice reached Rentaro's ears again, shrouding him in the icy feeling terror.

Reenacting the scene just now, this time, the muzzle was targeting his back unerringly.

"You cannot defeat me no matter how many times you try."

But just at this moment, Hotaru rushed over faster than the eye could follow.

"Ooooph!"

Rentaro looked back to see Hotaru had nimbly entangled the muscular man's arm, using her entire body strength to twist the enemy's gun-holding arm like a piece of cloth.

Presumably because it was weak against external force, the optical camouflage was dispelled, revealing an exceptionally massive man in a coat.

Rentaro could even hear the intense tension in the intertwined muscle fibers of the man's arm.

"This guy!"

However, the enemy was no slouch either. Although his gun arm was restrained, he still used a forced motion contrary to human anatomy to turn his arm around and shake Hotaru off. Hotaru's back smashed hard against the ground while Swordtail aimed with his gun.

Recognizing the crisis, Rentaro rushed over frantically.

Just as Rentaro ran over, trying to shield Hotaru, two gunshots sounded at the same time. Feeling a sharp pain on his back, Rentaro gritted his teeth and endured it.

Pinned under him, Hotaru stared with wide and wavering eyes:

"Rentaro...! What are you doing—"

Blood dripped from his uniform onto Hotaru's face. With a look of disbelief, Hotaru shook her head hard and yelled:

"You idiot! I have Enhanced Regeneration, why—"

"—Shut up!"

Hotaru could not find words to say.

"That attitude is what I hate about you."

"Idiot! You'll die!"

Swordtail continued to fire, striking Rentaro's back each time.

"Gahhhhhhhhhhh!"

Hotaru shook her head forcefully.

"Stop it! Please, don't do this."

Tears were overflowing from her eyes while she murmured in a feeble voice.

"At least allow me to protect my partner's life this time."

"Game over, brats."

Hearing Swordtail's voice from behind, Rentaro could not think of a solution. Things were really over now. Expecting the scorching bullet that was about to come, he could not help but tense his entire body.

But then he was suddenly struck and sent flying to the side.

A gunshot rang out. Blood spurted out from Hotaru's left chest, in other words, the position of the heart.

For a while, Rentaro failed to comprehend what had happened.

Hotaru died. As soon as his comprehension caught up with reality, a surge of intense emotions rushed from his feet up to the top of his head.

"You bastard!"

I can't let him go invisible again. While spitting blood, Rentaro got up and ran as hard as he could, lowering his body's center of gravity.

His rotating leg ejected a shell, using the thrust generated to raise his leg.

Tendo Style Martial Arts, Type 2, Number 14—

"Hidden Zen, Mysterious White Cave!"

Executing a mid level kick with his body bent down, Rentaro caught the man's giant body in the chest while he was staring in surprise. A clean hit.

The surrounding air shook. Giving material form to thrust, Rentaro's leg sent the brawny man's body flying like a dead leaf, smashing him hard in the middle of the mountains of wooden crates. Dust swirled and filled the air while the enemy was buried and pinned down by the collapsed wooden crates.

"Guh!"

Rentaro spat out blood. The bloodstains on the floor were very frightening.

The intense recoil from using the magazines inside his body before his wounds closed up was making his injuries more severe.

But he could still move.

Holding up his gun, he carefully walked deeper into the warehouse. Inside the warehouse where the greatest number of wooden crates were kept, the crates were scattered by Swordtail like bowling pins. It was very hard to confirm the guy's dead body.

He could not possibly be alive after that.

A Tendo Style Martial Arts technique combined with a cartridge's thrust that could rival a jet engine's, together with a direct hit. This level of destructive power was akin to a truck smashing into the enemy at high speed.

One could even say that it was incredible that the enemy was not pulverized completely by the impact.

Rentaro felt his throat itch. In order to prevent inhaling the dust hanging in the air, he covered his mouth with his empty hand.

Finally, he found Swordtail's brown coat. In the surroundings was a carpet of debris from a large number of wooden crates, buried under them was the guy with only his back exposed.

Walking over to him, Rentaro pulled the trigger on his Beretta twice without hesitation. This was "shooting the corpse" to prevent the enemy from feigning death to launch a surprise attack.

Fibers were ejected from the ruptured coat but there was no blood. Rentaro felt that something was not right.

Kicking the coat with the tip of his foot, Rentaro flipped it over completely.

Before the surprise struck him, he already backed himself against a nearby wooden crate.

Checking at what lay beneath the coat again, he saw a human outline piled up from wooden debris but no body.

Suddenly feeling killing intent on his left side, Rentaro made a split-second decision and leaned back, drawing in his chin. A fist immediately brushed past his ear like a rock. Having twisted his body forcefully into this posture, Rentaro could not handle the combat boot approaching his view at an alarming speed.

The heavy blow to his abdomen, more powerful than expected, sent him flying far away, bouncing a few times before smashing a wooden crate and rolling to the side of a wall.

"Gah!"

"Your decisions are not bad."

From the other side of the dark warehouse came a calm voice.

By the time Rentaro re-focused his blurry vision, he noticed Swordtail standing a meter away from him.

The enemy was injured too. Blood from scratches were stained on his pants while his shoulders were moving up and down intensely.

Worn on Swordtail's muscular upper torso, resembling an upside down triangle, was a black tank top.

"You failed because you were careless, thinking I was on the same level as Hummingbird."

Swordtail's gun was pointed at Rentaro's head. The muzzle looked like a bottomless abyss.

"You lose."

"—This hubris is the reason for your failure."

Suddenly finding a figure sitting on his shoulder, Swordtail was more surprised than anyone else.

"You... How on earth!?"

To prevent Swordtail from shaking her off, Hotaru wrapped her legs around his neck securely then used her free hands to draw the dual pistols from the holster at her lower back.

"I will make you taste one tenth the pain Mr. Kihachi felt."

After a continuous display of roaring gunshots and muzzle flash, Rentaro felt smelly and hot blood splash on his face.

"Uwahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Unfazed and roaring like a beast, Swordtail tried to shake off Hotaru, hence Hotaru continued to fire at contact range, pouring all of her .45 bullets into his shoulder.

"Guh... Uwah...!"

Swordtail fell on his knees, his body leaning forward. Thud— The sound of a ground impact reached Rentaro's feet.

"Rentaro! Are you okay?"

Hotaru almost jumped on him to hug him by the neck.

Although things were so bad that his body almost had no feeling, Rentaro still nodded weakly.

The chill from blood loss was making his eyelids heavy. Seeing that, Hotaru shook him desperately.

"You must hurry and leave to get treated!"

Rentaro got up with her help, his continuously shaking knees holding up with much difficulty. It felt so cold. Due to excessive blood loss, he felt almost frozen by cold.

Rentaro unintentionally glanced at Swordtail. The result made him stare wide-eyed.

The muscular man's body had suddenly vanished, leaving a blood trail on the ground. The blood trail extended all the way to outside the room.

"Hotaru... That guy escaped..."

"No way, how can he still move with such wounds?"

"Looks like he definitely can."

Whether the New Human Creation Plan or the New World Creation Plan, all were absurd superhumans. The scary thing about replacing internal organs and bones with varanium was that critical wounds were not longer critical.

"Anyway, let's chase that guy first... We can't let him leave with information about us."

Real name being Juugo Katake, Swordtail made his way into a bathroom while leaning against the wall for support, invading a shower stall in a manner almost ripping the curtain off.

Adjusting the water to 36 degrees centigrade to facilitate washing off blood, he then poured the lukewarm water over his head.

How could something like this be even possible? Totally absurd.

Muttering emphatically, Juugo desperately clung to his consciousness.

The resilient nano-muscles made from carbon nanotubes as well as his self-repairing vanadium alloy vertebrae had blocked all the bullets and contracted blood vessels to prevent further blood loss. Installed in his body were organic transistors for monitoring vital signs and adjusting them.

Even so, the handgun bullets shot continuously into his body at such close range still caused Juugo's strongly built body damage that could not be ignored.

Only after washing off the bloodstains and confirming that optical camouflage functions had recovered perfectly did Juugo rush out of the bathroom to continue his escape.

Taking the elevator up, he stepped over a security guard's corpse on the ground floor to exit the building. After leaving the air conditioned environment, he was greeted by hot and humid air.

Whenever he recalled what had happened just now, he was filled with chagrin. As a true soldier of the New World Creation Plan, why was he losing to an older model dating back to before the war? How was he inferior to that guy in any way?

"Looks like you got messed up real bad."

"Who's there!?"

This was the courtyard in the heart of Shiba Heavy Industries' premises.

On the neatly trimmed lawn, a youth who approached from his hiding place under a tree.

He emerged slowly from the darkness. Realizing the identity of the young man whose silhouette was backlit by moonlight, Juugo was very surprised.

Dressed in Nukagari High's student uniform as a disguise, the youth was smiling.

"Darkstalker!?"

Why is he here? —This doubt surfaced in Juugo's mind but right now, all he could do was make use of this fortuitous turn of events.

"You came at the right time. I was just about to report something to Mr. Hitsuma through Nest. Just now, I took out Hotaru Kouro at one point but she resurrected. Looks like that Initiator's body contains Gastrea genes of extreme survivability."

"Man, it must have been tough for you."

Juugo did not know if this guy truly understood the severity of the situation, but Darkstalker's tone of voice was very indifferent and nonchalant. Juugo could not help but wave his hand impatiently.

"What are you still doing here!? The enemy is coming, so let me escape first."

"Sorry, but I cannot comply."

"What?"

"Although I've omitted official procedure, I will be executing you here. Only death awaits failures."

Unable to comprehend what the other guy was saying for a moment, Juugo could only stand there frozen for a while.

"What sick joke is this?"

"Most regrettably, this is no joke. You lost. Hence, the organization has decided to abandon you."

"I haven't lost!"

"You are the only one who thinks that."

So the organization really wanted to...?

"W-Wait. Give me another chance."

"Not needed."

Yuuga swept his bangs with his fingertips and mocked maliciously:

"Is it really that unbelievable? For you to end up executed."

Of course, Juugo refused to believe it. He had offered everything to the organization. Why was he being treated like this?

"..You bastard. Do you really think I'll accept my punishment obediently."

Yuuga shrugged and said:

"That's why they sent me."

Swordtail silently lowered his center of gravity and prepared to fight.

"How things be so ludicrous!? Go to hell. I'm going to ask Mr. Hitsuma directly. The organization cannot possibly abandon me!"

The pain that had persisted since a while ago vanished. Excessive adrenalin was dulling Juugo's awareness of pain.

He checked his legs. Although his internal and breathing organs were damaged, what was left of Juugo's natural body composed less than 50% of the whole. The rest was all made of cutting-edge technology instead of being a product of nature.

He slowed down his breathing and lowered his body temperature while staring at the opponent, taking a quiet step. The optical camouflage began to work its effects, causing Juugo's figure to meld completely into the background.

Juugo had heard of the abilities of his opponent's artificial eye. Precisely because this brat possessed what could be considered an outstanding power and relied on it fully, he was an easy target to dispose of for Juugo.

Trying his best to tiptoe, Juugo tried to circle around. Darkstalker continued to stare in the direction where Juugo was earlier. Pulling out a prepared knife secretly, Juugo was like a carnivorous predator ambushing prey, arriving to Darkstalker's right while barely making any sound. Then he swung the weapon horizontally for a one-hit kill.

This was an attack in full force for Juugo who had undertaken assassination operations many times. The time when Darkstalker noticed the attack would be the moment when his crying head was separated from his body.

Darkstalker's head was going to fly in the next second— However, Juugo's expectations were dashed. Without even looking at him, Darkstalker raised his right hand.

When the blade made contact with the right hand, there was instantly a sound of steel snapping. Then for some unknown reason, Juugo found his view shaking violently as though he had been electrocuted and his optical camouflage lost effect.

Juugo reflexively jumped backwards to wait for his field of view to recover but found the stainless steel knife shattered above the hilt.

The unbelievable sight made him tremble while the remainder of the hilt slid from his hand,

"Impossible...!"

"How is it impossible? You never expected yourself to be so stupid as to attack me despite our difference in power? Or let me be blunt, you never expected that miserly optical camouflage to be completely useless before me?"

Seeing Juugo frozen in place by shock, Darkstalker made a smile of pity, shrugging and spreading his hands.

"Including that invisibility magic trick of yours called Mariott Injection, I am definitely quite impressed but that's only limited to before I capture you in my vision. Using the computation functions of my two artificial eyes, I can calculate your attack method from the way your muscles are applying force, even where you are going to appear, almost to the point of *predicting the future*. All I had to do was suppress my yawns while waiting for the instant you were going to make a move."

"Then why, just by touching the knife like that—"

Juugo looked again at the knife's blade that had cracked then shattered. Suddenly, he realized something.

Speaking of which, he had heard that Darkstalker was equipped with yet another new type of military equipment.

"Could it be an ultrasonic vibration device?"

By the time Juugo yelled out, Yuuga had already crashed into his bosom, pressing his palm above Juugo's heart to deliver a lethal strike.

"You are correct. This time, I'll let you experience it's effects directly. So-called technological progress is capable of rendering the esoteric body-training spiritualism of martial artists into outdated nonsense."

Before Juugo even had enough time to regret, the life-ending palm delivered a vibration pulse enough to destroy cellular cohesion.

"This is my second power—Vairo Orchestration."

Accompanied by the intense pain of stirring internal organs, Juugo's heart swiftly ruptured. Without even the time to feel regret and despair, his consciousness was buried in the darkness of death.

Squish—after a sound that did not sound like a palm strike, Swordtail vomited a huge volume of blood, forming a puddle underfoot.

Swordtail staggered unsteadily like a drunk. After staring at Rentaro with eyes of disbelief, he then keeled over, unable to stand up ever again.

Chasing after Swordtail to exit the Shiba Heavy Industries building, Rentaro just happened to witness the two New World Creation Plan soldiers trying to kill each other.

He could not fathom why these two were fighting but the result was Swordtail getting defeated in one move.

Such an overwhelming difference in power could not be dismissed with an excuse of a mere moment's carelessness.

Total cellular necrosis occurred on Swordtail's chest where it had been in contact with Yuuga's palm. On the black palm-shaped mark left on Swordtail, who was lying face up on the ground, even clear palm lines could be seen imprinted there.

Identical to the move that had almost struck Rentaro directly at the Plaza Hotel, this turned out to be Yuuga's finishing move as suspected.

Rentaro felt an intense chill along his spine as though he had been plunged into ice.

His fingernails dug into flesh as he clenched his fists tightly, forcing himself to get a grip before walking towards Yuuga.

Separated by a distance of ten meters, in heart of the Shiba Heavy Industries premises, Rentaro Satomi and Yuuga Mitsugi met once again.

"Yuuga, Mitsugi..."

Rentaro slowly started to speak in fury. The first time they met was sniping incident when Rentaro was jumping through the air above the hotel and shot down. Not for even a second did Rentaro forget that.

In addition, Rentaro had a strong feeling that he was going to fight this guy again eventually.

"We finally meet again."

The corners of Yuuga's lips showed an expression of joy while he spread his hands in a welcome gesture.

"Even though it happened with timing I never expected, I didn't think someone on Swordtail's level could render you in such a sorry state."

"This is nothing."

Rentaro's body was still shaking and his vision unstable, but the blood he had spat out and staining his uniform was not very conspicuous.

Yuuga seemed to make a smile of pity.

"After fighting Swordtail and seeing for yourself his abilities, isn't it time for you to understand what the New World Creation Plan is about?"

"The New World Creation Plan is the continuation of the New Human Creation Plan, in other words, the second generation of mechanized soldiers."



Rentaro took a breath before continuing:

"You are using a replica of the artificial eye developed by Sumire Muroto—one of the Four Sages. Likewise, Hummingbird uses a copy of Ayn Rand's thought driven interface whereas Swordtail inherits the fruits of Arthur Zanuck's research. Dr. Sumire told me before that designing prosthetic limbs and eyes require all sorts of multidisciplinary knowledge so a mediocre researcher won't even be able to grasp the basic theories. On further thought, there's only one guy capable of copying those technologies and upgrading them."

Yuuga tilted his head slightly.

"Try me."

Sticking his chin up, Rentaro glared at Yuuga.

"The one leading this filthy project is precisely the last of the Four Sages—Albrecht Grunewald."

As though delivering a speech in concert with Rentaro, Yuuga spread his hands forcefully and announced in a loud voice:

"You are correct. Also, our organization is called the Five Wings Syndicate! Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Five Wings Syndicate...?"

"Have a look at this."

Yuuga pushed up his jacket sleeve together with the shirt sleeve beneath, exposing the skin from the inner side of his elbow and triceps.

Seeing the pattern carved there, Rentaro gasped.

"A pentagram with wings..."

This was what he had seen a number of times, but Yuuga's had four wings with complicated designs added to the tips of the star-shaped symbol by tattooing or something like that. However, two of the wings had been crossed out, presumably because erasing the pattern would be too much work, hence the wings were casually struck out with false scars like when a child was dissatisfied with their drawing.

"Two of my wings have been plucked off. That's why I fell to the ground, unable to fly."

"...I guess this mark probably depicts hierarchy in the Five Wings Syndicate. The number of wings drawn on the pentagram represents something like a person's rank, right?"

"Since you figured that out, it makes things much easier to explain. Just as you said, those with five wings have the highest authority, followed in sequence by four wings, three wings and two wings. Those with one wing are either common believers or branded slaves and livestock. Somewhere on Swordtail lying over there should be two wings."

Feeling the dense fog shrouding the truth clear up slightly, Rentaro cautiously took a step forward.

"When I was visiting Dr. Ayame Surumi's apartment, something called the phone using a voice changer to warn of Hummingbird's attack... That was you, right?"

Instantly, wind blew from below, causing Rentaro, Yuuga and Hotaru's hair to stand up while the leaves rustled on trees. The grass on the lawn also swayed in the wind.

"You're wrong."

"Quit posing. Why? Why did you act in my interest?"

Responding with silence for a while, Yuuga finally sighed as though in resignation.

"Mr. Satomi, have you ever cried due to the beauty of this world?"

"What?"

"I was born completely blind in both eyes."

Unable to grasp Yuuga's intent from his words, Rentaro did not know how to respond for an instant.

"Due to a disease contracted during my mother's pregnancy, yeah. I was born completely blind. Although I didn't feel particularly pitiful about my plight because I didn't lose my sight after cognitive development, kids tend to be brutal and intolerant. After starting elementary school, I was often made fun of and it filled me with resentment. What saved me at this time was precisely that Professor Grunewald as well as his secret project of second-generation mechanized soldiers like me. I'm guessing you've already noticed that my Model 21 Modified is different from your artificial eye. Even without releasing its power, I still have normal vision."

Yuuga righted his slightly tilted head to stare at Rentaro directly. The low-key color of subtlety in those eyes were gone, replaced by the grim atmosphere of an imminent fight.

"After becoming a mechanized soldier, I cried due to the beauty scenery of spring. Summer sunlight entering my eyes also made me cry. I cried for the beauty of autumn, crying for the beauty of winter's whiteness. I don't need anything else. I've decided to sacrifice everything to the professor. Hence, I must become strong. While lost in my feelings of intoxication, I successfully rose to four wings in rank, thus ascending to the exalted position as the professor's favored subordinate. However..."

Getting more and more emotional, Yuuga suddenly stopped his monologue, grinning with slight self-deprecation.

"A single failure caused me to lose two wings and even branded as a *failure* by the professor and forced to join the ranks of these filthy assassins. Just now, you asked why I acted in your interest? Don't make me laugh. It wasn't for your sake. I simply can't bear to let you get taken out by metal puppets like Hummingbird or Swordtail."

His eyes were filled with hate, staring intently at Rentaro as though refusing Rentaro's understanding.

"The professor told me that my wings can be restored as long as I defeat you. With that, I can also repay my debt to the professor too."

Although Rentaro had never seen Grunewald before, judging from the fact that he branded Yuuga a failure just from one mistake and used Rentaro as bait to provide a chance for Yuuga to make amends, this sort of behavior made it impossible for Rentaro to concede any respect for the man.

Tina's former master, Ayn Rand, was not much different. Apparently, apart from Sumire, the so-called Four Sages were all people who had nothing to do with morals and ethical conduct.

"Do you consider Grunewald to be an upstanding person despite forcing you into despicable assassination jobs?"

"Whether the professor's doings are right is not the main point. The only thing that matters is whether I trust the professor."

Yuuga turned his back to Rentaro then looked back slightly.

"I will wait for you at the final battlefield. Let's see who comes out on top then."

Saying that, Yuuga left the scene without looking back.

Yuuga departed from the heart of Shiba Heavy Industries. Motionless, Rentaro stared until he was certain that Yuuga was not going to come back. Only after a while did he exhale deeply.

Rentaro suddenly found his view slanting but luckily, Hotaru caught him in her arms.

His fatigue was apparently obvious to everyone.

"Rentaro, let's return to our hideout for now."

Just at this moment, police sirens came from somewhere. Very likely, the police was hurrying over right now.

Hotaru's face was very serious.

"Sounds like a lot of them."

"Feels like the cavalry arriving late."

Hotaru made an exasperated look.

"If you still have the strength to say stupid stuff like that, I'm sure you have no objections to a less gentle way of escaping, right?"

"A less gentle way of escaping?"

Hotaru's head was almost cocked at a right angle.

Following her gaze, Rentaro saw the roof of the Shiba Heavy Industries building.

"They'll catch up quickly if we make our escape from this place. Let's head to the top of the building then start jumping."

The elevator doors opened with a crisp electronic sound. Shaking nonstop, Rentaro stood up by using the elevator walls for support then left the elevator with Hotaru's help.

Suddenly, the roaring sound of a whirlwind could be heard.

The roof was well-lit and equipped with a helipad. The guiding lights positioned on the four corners of the helipad were flashing red.

Rentaro turned his head to look around. From the helipad, he could see the flashing red, yellow and blue neon signs from the streets at night down below.

The revolving warning lights of police cars were concentrated all together in the distance below. Rentaro felt a sense of déjà vu.

Hugging his shoulders, Hotaru's palms felt very warm, giving Rentaro a greater sense of peace and comfort than before.

"We're heading off. Hold tighter."

Rentaro originally intended to thank her but his muscles, pale and cold as a corpse's were not obeying him, making it impossible to speak properly at all.

Just at this moment—

"Freeze! One false move and I'm gonna shoot."

Hearing the sound of a revolver's chamber spinning, Rentaro and Hotaru instantly halted.

"Arms up high. Turn around slowly. Not too fast."

To avoid provoking the guy, Rentaro had no choice but to raise his arms and turn around slowly. In front of him was a detective holding a revolver with both hands, a grim expression on his face.

In other words, a person whom Rentaro did not want to see the most in this situation.

"Inspector Tadashima..."

Hotaru prepared to attack but Rentaro reached out to stop her and took a step forward.

The stuffy night wind was blowing between Rentaro and Shigetoku Tadashima. Billowing and flapping, their clothing kept striking their bodies.

"You seem to like high places a lot, seeing as how you're always appearing on buildings or high-rise apartments. Totally like an idiot."

Rentaro tried moving his lower jaw to confirm his ability to speak.

"Let us go, Inspector."

"No way! I'm a law enforcer, tasked with the duty to uphold the law. The law is the order that brings light to this world. Without the law, the world will be plunged into darkness. A world without order cannot be called a society. It will be utter chaos."

"Then justice can be put aside?"

"Are you calling yourself the side of justice? What conspiracy is there behind this incident? How much do you know right now?"

"I repeated myself many times already during interrogation."

"So what? Do you think the outrageous delusions you recorded in your testimony will turn into reality? Stop kidding yourself!"

"The enemy organization's actions are destroying the order you speak of, yet you are still aiding the enemy. You can't muddle through just by saying you don't know. Your ignorance is your own responsibility. I'm leaving."

"Do you think I'll let you go for no reason just like that?"

"Atsurou Hitsuma is a spy lurking inside the police force."

"Bullshit!"

Tadashima shook his head, seemingly very distraught.

"Impossible... Nonsense...!"

"Then why don't you shoot me?"

Hotaru looked at Rentaro in fear.

"Hold on, Rentaro...!"

"Don't butt in, Hotaru. I hope that at least that man there can understand my thinking."

Rentaro turned to Tadashima again.

"If you think you're right, then shoot me with your gun. Once arrested, I'm as good as sentenced. No, I'll probably die in prison. The enemy will definitely make a move."

"Impossible. We are the police. At the minimum, we guarantee the defendant's safety."

"The police is completely useless. That's the kind of enemy we're facing."

"..."

"Your reaction shows that you've met Atsurou Hitsuma, right? If you've spent any time with him, you probably noticed that something's fishy with him, right?"

Unable to refute Rentaro, Tadashima had trouble finding words. His expression, slightly lowered, seemed to be representing the shame in his heart.

"I see... So even though you found him suspicious, in the end, you still decided to obediently follow orders from above?"

"..."

Rentaro closed his eyes and shook his head.

"Why don't you shoot me and go claim a great reward?"

"I-I..."

Tadashima shook violently. Clutching his gun, his index finger was unable to move, as though frozen solid. His face was also drenched by cold sweat.

"If you're not gonna shoot, I'm leaving."

Rentaro moved his chin up to gesture to Hotaru. Then he rested against her shoulder and leaned forward.

"Ah! Hey!"

Tadashima hastily rushed over to the edge of the building and looked down. The black-clad youth's figure had already melded into the streets at night. There was no sign of him at all.

"~~~~~!"

Unable to vent his anger, Tadashima pulled the trigger thrice with the gun aimed at the air. Three shots rang out and were lost in the wind. Even so, he was still unable to contain the rage in his heart, so he threw the gun at the floor.

Falling to his knees, Tadashima violently smashed his fist into the concrete, ignoring the pain.

"Why!? Why wasn't I able to shoot him just now?"

He had to shoot. To prove that he was a representative of the *law*, under those circumstances, Shigetoku Tadashima ought to shoot and kill detestable criminals in order to symbolize his conviction.

In the end, Tadashima still failed to do it.

Somewhere in a corner of his heart, he suspected whether Rentaro was the true killer or not. Hitsuma's secretive and furtive investigation policy was also making him frown.

However, this result implied with unquestionable certainty that the *law* Tadashima revered had lost completely.

Shigetoku Tadashima's "law" had submitted to a the inexperienced "justice" revealed by the CivSec.

"Section Chief! So you're here!"

Tadashima looked back. Yoshikawa was running here in alarm, probably due to hearing the gunshots.

Tadashima felt his thoughts cool down instantly. Patting the dust of his knees and getting up, he walked straight to his subordinate.

"I'm going to leave investigation for now. There are things I need to clear up first. Superintendent Hitsuma will be arriving on scene soon, so just follow that guy's orders."

"How did this happen? What's with you, boss? Boss!"

The yelling coming from behind was making Tadashima hesitant but in the end, he left the scene shrugging without looking back.

He had to do this. Because he understood that unless he eliminated the doubt in his heart, he would face great difficulty if he wanted to continue carrying out a police officer's duties with righteous conviction.

Chapter 4 - Night Sky Devoid of Stars

Part 1

Inside a dream.

The Happy Building was dyed red by the setting sun behind it.

Ascending the stairs, one passed through the door marked by the sign reading "Tendo Civil Security Company."

Scattered on the sofa was clothing that Enju had taken off. Inside the sink behind the curtain was a pile of dirty dishes.

The reception sofa was Tina's favorite spot. Ruled by nocturnal instincts, she was often curled up there, sleeping like a kitten. Looking from behind the sofa, it looked like the depression caused by her weight was still there but Tina herself was not present. Lying on top of the reception table was half-written mathematics homework as well as a pile eraser dust.

The sound of running water. Passing through the kitchen curtain, one could see the sink overflowing from the tap that had been turned off. Rentaro's socks were soaked in the cold water in there.

Despite the strong impression of people living there, there was no a single person present. It was almost like the Mary Celeste incident where the eponymous ship was discovered in the Atlantic without a single soul on board.

For some reason, all Rentaro knew was that everyone was gone.

Kisara was gone. Enju and Tina were dead or killed. The past days were gone and irretrievable. This office had turned into an empty shell. Videos of the Tendo Civil Security Company from happy days flashed past in a looping manner, constructing the Tendo Civil Security Company's present view from those old memories. Unfortunately, the actors of those videos were all gone and erased clean.

Indescribable grief descended.

Rentaro was filled with incomparable regret, kneeling down on the spot to cry with his head in his hands. Sobbing flowed out of his throat like that of a crushed frog's. It's all my fault. All because I failed to save everyone.

Suddenly, he heard someone calling him. A girl's voice. It was calling to him desperately.

He turned his head back to look for the voice's owner. Where was the source? From which direction was he hearing her? It was a voice that belonged to neither Kisara, Enju, nor Tina.

Yes, this voice was—

The dreamward path was cut off. Rentaro's consciousness gradually floated up from the mud.

The sensation against his back felt very hard while his body seemed as heavy as lead. His clothing was drenched with sweat. His throat felt quite parched.

The voice calling him did not stop. Rentaro blinked many times before managing to force his eyelids to stay open.

"What the heck... So noisy."

He grumbled weakly, his blurry vision gradually focusing. The one shaking his body while calling to him was Hotaru. Her lips were pursed tightly while the edges of her eyes were red. Rentaro felt very surprised by the sight.

"At least answer once if you're still alive!"

"This place is...?"

Hotaru wiped the corner of her eyes with a sleeve.

"The carving factory where we hid earlier."

Only then did Rentaro first start to recognize the familiar decrepit ceiling.

Turning his neck, his nerves instantly felt intense pain. Speaking of which, he had blocked who knew how many handgun bullets in his back. Turning his head carefully to examine his body, he found that his jacket and shirt had been removed and he was wrapped in bandages from his armpits down to his abdomen, making him look quite a bit like an ancient wandering masterless samurai.

In any case, he had evidently survived.

By the time Rentaro noticed, Hotaru had resumed her usual demeanor. Going hmph, she raised her chin haughtily.

"The bullets are all taken out. There should be none left, but I can't guarantee it."

In the metal tray beside them, tweezers, bloodstained degreased cotton and other objects could be seen.

"Wow, I can't believe you were able to extract the bullets."

"I've treated myself in the past."

Almost failing to understand her, Rentaro frantically stared at her.

"So you've been shot many times?"

"Indeed. So what?"

"Uh, this isn't anything minor..."

Rentaro hesitated for a while, wondering how to best ask his question, but noticed the dark circles under Hotaru's eyes.

"You haven't slept?"

Hotaru apparently thought it was embarrassing for others to spot dark circles under her eyes and immediately covered her eyes with both hands. Only after bringing herself to accept the fact did she look up and puff out her chest deliberately.

"Indeed, I didn't sleep last night. Thanks to a certain fool. You must take responsibility."

Rentaro smiled wryly due to her pretentious ways.

"Hey, what's with you?"

Hotaru murmured suddenly in a barely audible voice:

"Getting hurt to protect me... Why do you keep doing something so stupid? Haven't I said that this is just a transaction. I am using you while you can use me in return. I won't care about your life when fighting while conversely, you can abandon me any time."

"You did say that."

In order not to let the atmosphere get too heavy, Rentaro answered casually. Hearing him, Hotaru looked down and turned her head to the side as though sulking.

"You're such an idiot."

A strange silence descended. Although neither of them were saying a word, it was definitely not an uncomfortable silence.

Although Rentaro did not hate this kind of mood, it could not be prolonged indefinitely. There was still a mountain of issues waiting for him to consider.

Raising his hand, he pointed outside.

"This place is so hot. Do you want to go out for some air"

The moon was out.

The ruins of the carving factory was near a river. The rain falling from yesterday morning to noon had caused the water level to rise. Shrouded in the color of night, the river water seemed to flow quite fast while the gurgling water sounds brought coolness to one's ears.

Rentaro and Hotaru walked side by side along the floodbank by the river.

Even though it was late at night, there were still old people taking dogs out for walks or panting joggers in tracksuits passing by every now and then.

Walking downstream for a while, Hotaru turned her gaze with great exasperation.

"Doesn't it hurt? The enhancement surgery of the New Human Creation Plan must be amazing, even capable of controlling pain."

"Yeah, it's just as you say."

Rentaro lied to Hotaru. His injuries were still hurting but if he say that honestly, Hotaru would surely force him to lie down and rest. Rentaro could not allow that.

Hazily, Rentaro recalled his dream from earlier. He was crying in sorrow in the deserted Tendo Civil Security Company after Kisara, Tina and Enju had left—That was definitely not just a dream.

If he did not try everything he could to rescue those girls, he was going to confront the same issue in the near future. The dream was just a kind of attempt in predicting the future.

Precisely because of that, time was of the essence.

"Rentaro, look at this."

Looking at the object that Hotaru had taken out of her chest pocket, Rentaro thought it was something like a fallen leaf at first.

But then he quickly realized it was a key in a rare shape. The bow of the key was shaped like a maple leaf while the blade looked like a red maple, probably having been chemically treated. It could be considered an exquisite item of meticulous craftsmanship.

"What is this?"

"Something on Swordtail."

Rentaro felt surprised as he examined the object again.

"His cellphone was broken by Darkstalker so this is the only clue remaining."

Rentaro rubbed his chin.

"What does this key open, I wonder...?"

Hotaru shook her head and murmured: "I can't guess what it is either."

Still without an answer after much discussion, they decided to keep the key for now.

Then Hotaru took out a folded piece of paper from her pocket.

"There's something else, this."

Rentaro only suddenly realized after receiving the paper and opening it up. This was the Gastrea cell analysis report that he had asked Miori to do.

Rentaro stared at the paper, almost burning a hole in it through his gaze. Listed on there were chemicals whose names he had never heard before. Just a single glance at them was enough to give him a splitting headache.

"How the heck am I supposed to read this paper?"

"I don't know the details either, but Miss Miori said to take note of this spot."

Rentaro looked at where Hotaru pointed and instantly understood.

Trihydroxyzine—0.1 milligrams were identified in the Gastrea cell sample.

At this moment, Rentaro and Hotaru were shrouded by a dense shadow. It was a train passing through a raised bridge while making earsplitting noise. Once the train passed, all that was left was silent peace and calm.

"Trihydroxyzine... No way?"

Hotaru narrowed her eyes.

"You know what it is?"

Rentaro nodded, staring into those blue-gray eyes in that little head.

"Hotaru, how much do you know about the Gastrea War?"

Hotaru shrugged, apparently not understanding why Rentaro asked the question.

"I am from the Innocent Generation. To me, the Gastrea War is just a story of legend."

Rentaro closed his eyes and began to search through his terrifying memories of the war.

"During the war, in order to combat the Gastrea whose numbers were growing geometrically through viral infection, humans researched in desperation holding nothing back. All sorts of society's ethics as well as moral principles that ought to be protected were all thrown aside. This was 'turning a blind eye' on a global scale. This state of affairs resulted in the spread of cluster bombs, poison gas, unbridled use of landmines, genetic modification, human experiments and all sorts of atrocities. The New Human Creation Plan is also one of its bastard children."

"So the same goes for trihydroxyzine?"

Rentaro nodded.

"Trihydroxyzine was first promoted as a revolutionary drug that was able to inhibit the proliferation of the Gastrea virus, but was banned all of a sudden. Its effects are very short-lived but would cause the virus to develop resistance, making its spread even more virulent. However, this drug also became the center of attention due to another use."

"Another use?"

"When used on humans or Gastrea, it causes a powerful sedative effect. Hence it was used as a date rape drug for quite a while. The recalled trihydroxyzine was leaked back to society through the black market, causing serious social problems."

The results of human research often led to completely unpredictable directions of development.

For example, the *Penicillium* fungus' metabolic byproduct, in other words, penicillin, was able to save millions of lives as an antibiotic. Then there were substances like trihydroxyzine that were originally made with benevolent intentions but caught the eye of dark forces and became tainted with notoriety.

Rentaro was gouged a massive hole in his abdomen during the battle against Kagetane Hiruko and managed to return from the verge of death thanks to the experimental drug AGV—officially named the Anti-Gastrea Virus experimental drug. This too was originally Sumire's failed attempt to inhibit the proliferation of the Gastrea virus but ended up as another example of such drugs gaining recognition for other effects.

"Why was this substance found in the Gastrea cells?"

"I'm not sure either... Due to turning into a social problem, there was a harsh crackdown on the drug and wholesalers began to choose their customers carefully. This topic has left news talk shows for quite a while, which is why I completely forgot about this drug."

"Hey Rentaro, so this sedative side-effect works on Gastrea too?"

"It works no matter human or Gastrea. Of course, because the Gastrea virus excels at eliminating and neutralizing foreign objects that had invaded the body, it requires a massive dose of trihydroxyzine in order to produce a strong and sustained sedative effect on Gastrea."

"That's exactly why such a large quantity of this substance was found in the cell analysis report, right?"

Rentaro suddenly thought of something:

"Uh, but speaking of which, what is the Five Wings Syndicate planning to do by sedating Gastrea? What is the so-called Black Swan Project about?"

Hotaru shook her head silently.

The more Rentaro imagined, the more of these unpleasant delusions lingered in his heart, unable to be dispelled.

The problem was how the Five Wings Syndicate sourced their trihydroxyzine.

Channels were required if one wished to acquire quantities beyond a certain level and meant unavoidable contact with underground businesses. Also, it could also expose their intents and movements as a result.

"Underground businesses huh?" muttered Rentaro.

"Do you have connections to follow this lead?"

The depths of Hotaru's eyes glinted with sharp light.

Part 2

From morning to noon the next day, Rentaro focused on recuperating from his injuries. It was night by the time he actually went on the move.

Taking a train to visit the outskirts zone, they arrived at Tokyo Area's thirty-first ward.

On this day in the year 2031, although there were so signs of redevelopment in the outskirts zones that were mostly ruins, the more inland parts of the former wards of Shinkawa, Koto and Minato, enclosed within Tokyo Bay's Monoliths, had relatively fewer ruins.

Rentaro knew it was very convenient to use these types of locations for meetings. Furthermore, apart from residents, there were almost no ordinary townsfolk around in the middle of the night, further avoiding attention.

But still, he could not afford to be careless.

The person they were about to meet was undoubtedly a member of the illegal gangs. Conversely, the other side was also very adept at taking care of dead bodies in the outskirts zones.

After knowing the meeting location they were heading to, Rentaro already prepared himself to walk a long distance after getting off the train, except that he never expected to walk almost to the Monolith boundary.

As though absorbing darkness to become pure black, the Monolith remained as a very conspicuous landmark under the night sky, hence providing a sense of direction.

Passing through the wasteland with its weird outlines, they could finally smell the salty spray of the sea accompanied by the sound of waves.

Climbing on top of a piece of debris protruding relatively higher, Rentaro looked at the black mirror of the water surface, gently rippling as it reflected faint moonlight, glistening brightly.

The unending sound of waves felt pleasant to the ears. Rentaro stared at the mass of darkness that was the Monolith ahead.

At the seaside pier, there was a neat line of what appeared to be fishmongers' warehouses. Checking back and forth between the numbers on a sheet of paper and what was written on the walls, Rentaro advanced until he finally reached a facility that was larger than all the other buildings.

This was probably originally a factory for refrigerating and processing seafood after the catches were hauled onto shore. Washed by the tides, the words on the walls were impossible to read. But after checking the address, Rentaro was certain this was the right place.

The time was now midnight.

The one whom Rentaro wanted to meet the most was still nowhere in sight.

"So this is the sea..."

Unconcerned with what Rentaro was thinking, Hotaru stared unsteadily at the sea with an expression of reverence.

"You've never seen it before?"

Hotaru looked up and nodded in reply.

"Can I go over to have a look?"

Rentaro smiled awkwardly.

"You don't need my permission, right?"

Due to the protection of the Monolith's magnetic field, people could freely enter the water and even swim in the sea as long as they stayed not too far from the shore.

But in the year 2031 when people were afraid of marine Gastrea, swimming in the sea was seen as equivalent to mental illness.

The fishing industry was essentially wiped out. Although there existed missile battleships fortified with varanium hulls, the situation was definitely not safe. The supply of seafood could only depend on aquaculture along the shore, hence prices were greatly inflated. Rentaro also believed that this could not be helped.

Having forgotten all her wariness against Rentaro, Hotaru rushed all at once to the sea she was seeing for the first time. Marveling at the coldness of seawater, she took a lick and showed great surprise at the unknown taste on the tip of her tongue.

"Look, Rentaro, it's salty!"

"Of course!"

Hotaru's eyes, filled with curiosity, were almost like a child's. In addition, Rentaro was reminded of Enju.

Speaking of which, back when he first met Enju, she had also been full of hostility. Rentaro could not help but smile wryly.

"There's a Monolith very near here. Are you okay?"

Initiators carried the same Gastrea virus in their bodies. Depending on the viral corrosion rate, proximity to varanium would cause all sorts of effects on their bodies.

"No problem. My corrosion rate is only 10% plus a bit."

"Really...? At least you're different from Enju on that point."

"What did you say?"

"Nothing..."

Rentaro stared at the other side of the endless sea, thinking about Enju who was still under confinement.

—Enju, I will surely bring you back.

Just at this time, the sound of footsteps on soil came from somewhere. Rentaro turned his head back to see a man approaching leisurely.

The guy was neither young nor old, giving an impression of indeterminate age. Dressed in an all-white suit, his dark-brown complexion, lacking in luster, gave the mistaken impression that he was elderly, but the light in his eyes was very vigorous. Rentaro's instincts as a CivSec told him that this guy could not be trusted.

"You're the one referred to us by Mr. Abe?"

Rentaro nodded silently.

Before coming here, Rentaro and Hotaru had contacted the loan sharks—Koufuu Finance—the Happy Building's fourth-floor tenants to arrange a secret meeting with the yakuza.

Rentaro's personal contacts were virtually all watched by the police but no one would probably guess that he would get involved with the yakuza, right? Hence, he made this decision.

Having met each other a couple times, Shouki Abe the yakuza member seemed unexpectedly nervous when encountering Rentaro.

After some casual chatting, he had borrowed a lighter to lit a cigarette before finally showing a more relaxed expression. Abe told Rentaro the reason: it was because "Rentaro's appearance had changed so much that he was taken greatly by surprise."

Indeed, Rentaro had worn sunglasses to avoid getting tracked by security cameras and facial recognition. These few days, he had not had a chance to shave either. Perhaps due to not eating proper meals, his face probably looked a lot skinnier.

As soon as his thoughts reached this point, Rentaro shook his head. What Abe meant probably was not the surface.

Falling into an underhanded trap, trying to find a chance to turn things around, Rentaro's entire being definitely changed a lot. For someone like Abe who lived in the yakuza world, Rentaro exuded aura that intimidated on first sight.

For someone like him to have been called the Tokyo Area's savior not too long ago, Rentaro found it quite ironic whenever this crossed his mind.

When he asked Abe about black market channels for trihydroxyzine, Abe explained the market situation with a difficult expression on his face.

According to Abe, the amount of trihydroxyzine circulating on the streets in the alleyways was decreasing, resulting in rising prices. Furthermore, a mysterious organization was reputedly monopolizing the trihydroxyzine supply.

Finally, Abe promised Rentaro to find someone in charge of deliveries to explain things in greater detail for him.

'Mr. Rentaro, allow me to add a final comment. Those of us in the business also have our own principles. Personally, I'm very opposed to the drug trade. Almost half of my group's current income relies on online insider trading on things like stocks—in other words, transactions without involving tangible money. I think this is much better than pushing drugs. I was only demoted to handling high-interest loans because I hate drugs. But don't get the wrong idea that the Koufuu Syndicate will stand entirely on your side. If you block my organization's path to profit, even for the slightest bit, we will get rid of you before the cops.'

In order to stop replaying his conversation with Abe in his mind, Rentaro shook his head to drive the memory away before observing the deliveryman again.

That guy was by the pier staring at the black surface of the sea beyond the wavebreakers. He threw a sideways glance at Rentaro and said:

"So what do you wanna know? Great savior of the Tokyo Area."

Rentaro returned the man's sarcastic attitude with a cold gaze.

"Who's been buying up large amounts of trihydroxyzine from the market?"

"We can't possibly leak info about trading partners. In this business, trust is more important than anything else."

Rentaro felt very impatient. Unused to making deals with others as he was, even he knew that the other guy's attitude was clearly trying to bargain for a better price.

"Cut the crap. How much do you want?"

The man made a lewd smile and raised three fingers. "Ha, the going rate for information is pretty much that nowadays."

Profiting from the misfortune of others. A bloodthirsty hyena.

"I'll double that. But you only get paid after things work out."

"Hey buddy, that's not even funny."

"I'm a bit strapped for cash at the moment. Once I deal with things, I'll pay you double."

"Why should I believe this kind of empty promise?"

"If I die, you won't get a single penny. You don't want to do all that work only to end up with nothing, right? Luckily, I'm so famous that even you know my face, so you don't have to worry about me fleeing."

"What if I refuse?"

"Between you and me, only one of us will leave this place alive. I'll be frank, I don't intend to die here."

The sea breeze blew Rentaro's uniform and the deliveryman's suit, causing them to flutter hard.

"I want triple."

Rentaro nodded. Deal.

"Let's talk."

The man took out a cigarette from his suit and lit it. The blue smoke was swiftly blown away by the sea breeze.

"To be honest, I don't know too much about the client. I only know that the other side has someone who serves as a middleman to deal with me. That guy is quite tight lipped. Don't ask questions is the rule of this business. Anything goes as long as the money's paid."

"Hey!"

Rentaro was about to fly into a rage when the man extended his hand to stop him.

"Patience, patience. However, every time after the other side paid up, I'm asked to delivery the trihydroxyzine to a specified location. That place is a bit unusual to say the least."

"An unusual place?"

"Outskirt zone near a Monolith. There's a manhole that leads to something like an underground tunnel. Every time, I just throw the drugs down the manhole and leave. I'm guessing under there should be those guy's base or something."

Rentaro felt a turning point.

"Hotaru."

Rentaro turned to look at the brown-haired girl next to him. Showing an expression that showed she was likewise containing her excitement, she nodded heavily.

"A clue finally. That place could very well be the Five Wings Syndicate's base."

Rentaro asked for the manhole's exact location, which happened to be exactly opposite their current position, in an outskirt zone on the other side.

Simply traveling there was going to take quite some time.

Rentaro intended to set off immediately but just as he was turning around to leave, the other guy stopped him with a call of "Hold on a sec."

"Say, what are you guys planning to do over there?"

"Of course barging in to question the other side and get to the bottom of things, duh?"

"Judging from the size of their orders, the facility you're going to should have a lot of manpower. I see that you two only have handguns for weapons. Don't tell me you're going to go against the entire base so shabbily equipped?"

"What the heck are you trying to say?"

The deliveryman shrugged unnaturally and answered:

"Nothing much, it's just that I won't get paid if you die. If I'm gonna take a gamble, I might as well bet big. Follow me."

Saying that, the man went from their current location, the seafood processing plant's truck entrance, to the product management center, entering the building.

Rentaro exchanged a glance with Hotaru.

"What do you think?"

"Very suspicious, but our lack of equipment is undeniable truth. Let's go have a look after all."

Roughly ten steps behind the deliveryman who was walking along the corridor with a flashlight without looking back, Rentaro and Hotaru followed.

For an abandoned site in an outskirts zone, this seafood processing plant was breaking down in quite an orderly fashion.

Rentaro had seen a ton of similar ruins before, so he could distinguish between abandoned locations that had truly been deserted for a long time and places that looked abandoned at first glance but were actually not. Instinct told him that this place belonged in the latter category.

Normally speaking, usable items inside buildings would all get taken away by outskirts zone residents, but this did not happen here.

Ascending to the second floor, the man finally stopped in front of a door. Holding his flashlight in his mouth, he turned the rusted door handle.

The tightly shut door of what should be the cold storage opened with a heavy sound, greeting them with a familiar smell of metal and gear oil.

Rentaro leaned forward to look and could not help but gasp.

Simply stated, this was a weapons storage vault.

Hanging on the walls was a large number of handguns, grenades, assault rifles and rocket launchers. Without exception, all of them were the latest models.

Rentaro looked back in surprise. The man shrugged and answered.

"Take whatever you like."

"Can we?"

The man smiled awkwardly as though very embarrassed.

"Let me make myself clear first. I'm not doing this to help you but to make sure you live so that I get paid. Don't get the wrong idea."

Rentaro nodded to express his gratitude then looked around the place again.

Touching the wooden crates nearby, they felt coarse and humid. Using the crowbar the guy tossed to him, Rentaro opened the lid to reveal straw padding inside the crate and a large number of KRISS Vector submachine guns wrapped in oilpaper.

"This side's got the sniper rifles, right?"

Rentaro looked back to see Hotaru operating a sniper rifle to examine it.

"A M24 Sniper Weapon System huh..."

This was the United States Army's standard-issue sniper rifle customized from the masterpiece of a rifle, the Remington Model 700. The optical scope was a 10x fixed power riflescope manufactured by Leupold Optics. The thoroughly customized version was called the M24A3 and supposed to be made to order for the military, so Rentaro never expected to find it in such a place. However—

"This can't hit anything without zeroing it in first."

"Wow, you really know your stuff."

"There's an expert at the company I work at. Do you know how to use this type of gun?"

"Yes, I've practiced a bit before. I'll do a zero in shot at 100m first. Do you want to take one too?"

"Nah, although it's a rare chance, my close quarter combat speed will be affected if I carry a weapon heavier than a handgun, so I'd better not."

Hotaru did not take offense at her rejected suggestion. Crossing her arms, she then said:

"I see. Then why don't you take the explosives while you're at it."

"Explosives?"

Hotaru reached into a wooden crate, pulling out the contents and laying them in a line on the floor.

The long and slender plasticine-like stuff was probably plastic explosives. The quantities here were enough to go to war.

With all this stuff, it should be possible to take care of any enemy.

After some discussion on weapon selection, they left the room, only to find that the sky had already started getting bright.

The Pacific Ocean at dawn was as calm as a mirror.

Black clouds were incoming on the other side of the sea.

Rentaro took a deep breath then exhaled.

He thoroughly understood that the time for the decisive battle was gradually approaching.

Part 3

"Really, so Swordtail lost too..."

"Yes, what a real shame."

In a lounge at the Central Control Development Agency—commonly called the Black Building—Hitsuma was looking out at the street view outside the window.

Staring at Hitsuma's back, Yuuga Mitsugi was feeling oddly emotional.

"I originally thought you'd fly into a rage."

"Of course I'm very angry. But before roaring pointlessly, it's more important to come up with a way to take that guy... Rentaro Satomi's head."

Yuuga could not help but feel impressed.

An unreliable boss by no stretch, Hitsuma was apparently making progress after experiencing this type of hardship.

"Underestimating Hotaru Kouro's abilities was one of the reasons for failure this time. Although it's still unknown what kind of animal her Gastrea genes come from, according to what Swordtail said, she can apparently revive after death. Perhaps it's a special ability that feigns death to ambush the enemy."

"Any countermeasures?"

Thinking "perfect question," Yuuga took out a rifle bullet and spun it with his fingers.

The bullet was black while the shell shone with bronze luster. Seen from Hitsuma's eye, it was nothing more than an ordinary varanium bullet.

Hitsuma turned around and frowned.

"This is your ingenious plan? Hummingbird and Swordtail were also fighting using varanium knives and varanium ammunition. In the end, aren't you repeating—"

"—Hold on a sec, Mr. Hitsuma."

Holding the bullet in his palm, Yuuga continued:

"This bullet contains concentrated varanium in liquid form sealed inside, also called the concentrated varanium bullet. The instant it strikes the target, the bullet fractures inside the body, spreading concentrated liquid varanium, allowing it to kill Gastrea and Initiators alike with even Level III Regeneration. It took me a lot of work to get my hands on this."

"Level III Regeneration?"

"You haven't heard? Entities that can be killed by ordinary varanium weapons are defined as having 'Level I Regeneration' which almost all Gastrea and Initiators fall under, but exceeding this range is Level II. Varanium can still inhibit regeneration for Level IIs but as long as you decapitate them or pour flammable fuel and burn them, they can still be defeated. Then when you get to Level III, severed limbs will still remain alive and return to recombine with the body. This apparently works by mutual calling between cells."

"Mutual calling... between cells...?"

Seeing Hitsuma make an expected look of slight disgust, Yuuga could not help but smile wryly in his heart.

"Level IV is even more amazing. Regeneration is still possible even after losing all of the body's organs. Those guys can only be destroyed by thorough annihilation without a trace. This was Aldebaran's regeneration level. As for Level V, even if you throw those things into extremely low temperatures, vacuum or even lava at several thousand degrees, they can still regenerate as soon they return to normal environments. This is regeneration on a particle level. At the year 2031's level of science and technology, Level Vs are the ones that cannot be killed through physical means."

Hitsuma waved his hand impatiently.

"Enough. I don't want to know that much."

Hitsuma's handsome face glared sideways viciously at Yuuga.

"In any case, what you mean is that the bullet in your hand can kill Hotaru Kouro?"

"Of course. Hotaru Kouro is at most Level II. No matter how outstanding in regeneration ability, Level III is the absolute limit."

"In that case, I'll leave those two entirely to you. But that being said, those bullets you took such great pains to obtain might end up unused."

"How so?"

"Rentaro Satomi and Hotaru Kouro's hiding place might be found out soon. After the highway machine gun incident and the Shiba Heavy Industries incident, the direction they escaped can be estimated via triangulation. A search is currently being conducted in that area."

Thinking "I see now," Yuuga spread his hands and shrugged.

"Even if the location is found, ordinary police can't handle them, right?"

"That's why CivSecs need to be sent at this time."

Yuuga's gaze could not help but sharpen.

"...CivSecs?"

Hitsuma handed over a paper cup of coffee from the side but Yuuga waved his hand to refuse.

"You shouldn't be able to use CivSecs in this kind of situation, right?"

The police had originally covered up their embarrassment in the Magata Plaza Hotel siege where Rentaro had managed to escape the heavy barricade. This resulted in forcing the police in a predicament where they were unable to seek assistance from other agencies.

"Not necessarily."

"Who do you intend to send?"

Not wanting to waste the coffee, Hitsuma drank it himself.

"Some people are very suited to this task, so I sent them to the scene immediately after they heard my explanation. Unfortunately, there still isn't a chance for you to enter the stage."

Yuuga thought silently for a while before quietly shaking his head in the end.

"I'm still heading over to that place to wait for Rentaro Satomi, just as agreed originally."

Hitsuma made a puzzled look.

"Why would you do that?"

"Having never fought him personally, Mr. Hitsuma, you probably have no way of understanding a problem on this dimension. I can assert that he definitely will get there."

Hitsuma crossed his arms before his chest and thought for a while before finally giving up on understanding him, then threw away the emptied paper cup.

With a quick sound, yet another paper cup was added to massive pile of rubbish filling up the trash can.

"Suit yourself."

Yuuga nodded lightly. Hitsuma nodded in return.

"Then I'm on my way."

"Yeah."

This was enough as a farewell.

After saluting and exiting the lounge, Yuuga made his way alone to the final decisive battlefield.

Part 4

The pitch-black sky rumbled with apparent displeasure from time to time while an astounding downpour fell.

The sound of water flowing along gutters into drains was slowly transmitted to Rentaro's ears. In concert with the pitter patter of raindrops falling on the floor through the leaking ceiling, a symphony was being played.

While listening to these sounds, Rentaro was lying down in the carving factory.

The humidity was very high but the air temperature had dropped a bit. To Rentaro, this sort of weather was more comfortable than the crazy hot temperature.

Whenever he turned, the stone powder under his back would fly into the air, hence Rentaro tried to stay still and keep the same posture as much as possible.

Sleeping on the floor of the dark carving factory where the windows remained tightly shut, he felt like he was almost becoming a corpse.

Lying face up, Rentaro had his hands clasped on top of his chest, imitating the dead even though he was still alive.

He had agreed with Hotaru already that he was going to spend the entire day recuperating properly for his wounds to heal.

Although he wanted to crawl to his feet as soon as possible to hurry and investigate the truth of the Black Swan Project, his body's condition could not take the strain regardless of the impulse in his heart.

After refilling his calories, this type of useless thought were impossible to stop. Trying deliberately not to think was really quite a tough task.

Rentaro remembered how in Buddhism, in order to achieve the final goal of *enlightenment*, there was a type of training that was precisely for practicing how to stop yourself from thinking such unnecessary thoughts.

In the beginning, what surfaced in Rentaro's mind was Enju who would eventually be forced to partner up with another Promoter.

As a CivSec himself, Rentaro knew how difficult it was to disband an Initiator-Promoter pair once established. Besides, if the Promoter partnered with Enju were to discover her hidden potential, it would become even harder to let go.

But never would Rentaro have predicted that he would not be able to see her again ever since the day he was locked away in the detention facility.

I miss Enju so much. Rentaro missed her from the bottom of his heart.

Was her movements restricted? Did Enju find out about his death from the news? Or was she completely isolated from outside media?

And how was Tina? If she had to be sentenced after a court trial, it was going to take a long time. But as soon as Rentaro thought how the judge, lawyers, prosecutor and even the jury all belonged to the Lost Generation, Tina's verdict did not look optimistic at all.

Even if her human rights were guaranteed like normal person's, she must be sitting in a corner of a detention facility, hugging her knees.

Tina had been ordered around at whim by filthy adults. Rentaro really did not want her to witness his peers' shameful behavior anymore. No matter how much hardship he had to go through, Rentaro made up his mind to protect her.

At this point, Rentaro noticed that he seemed to be deliberately avoiding thinking about Kisara.

Indeed, he had not thought about that at all. Regarding Kisara who was set to marry Hitsuma, Rentaro's thoughts froze and delayed his conclusion indefinitely.

Speaking of which, why the situation had deteriorated to such an extent was all his fault for being stupid enough to believe that Hitsuma was a good person, even thinking of entrusting Kisara to him.

Rentaro suddenly felt the corners of his eyes heat up as tears slid across his cheeks from his eyes.

Everything was his fault.

How could he shamelessly say something delusional to her like "I hope you'll forsake the engagement and return to my side"? Besides, he had even said ugly things to trample Kisara's dignity when they parted ways at the visiting room.

At this moment, Rentaro heard footsteps from downstairs. He frantically wiped his tears and pretended to sleep. Soon the rusted door's hinges made a grinding sound.

Even without turning his head over, Rentaro could tell that it was Hotaru who had arrived.

"Rentaro, are you asleep?"

"...No, I'm awake."

Gingerly pushing her upper torso up, Hotaru shook her drenched brown hair and used both hands to wring her tank top's hem. From her flimsy form-fitting clothing, Rentaro could clearly see Hotaru's slim and tight waist as well as the gorgeous lines traced out by her chest.

Noticing Rentaro's gaze, Hotaru wrapped her arms around her upper body and immediately crouched down. Pursing her lips tightly, she glared at Rentaro.

"You saw?"

Rentaro scratched the back of his head hard.

"Idiot. I don't feel any joy even if I were to see a brat's naked body."

Hotaru could not help but mutter but finally sighed lightly and shook her head.

"I'll help you change your bandages and wipe your body. Take off your clothing."

Without waiting for an answer, she reached out to Rentaro's back and removed his uniform shirt then scrubbed his back hard.

Rentaro was unable to resist at all.

Feeling the cold sensation of a moistened handkerchief moving back and forth on his back, he could not bring himself to say that tomorrow was going to be the final decisive battle.

Starting at some point, Hotaru's attitude towards him had clearly changed. The hostility from when they first met was totally gone.

"You're really covered in scars."

"I remember this was a wound from the Third Kantou Battle. Over here was from the Seitenshi Sniping Incident. This one was left behind from the Kagetane Hiruko Terrorism Incident."

Rentaro pointed them out one by one. Not one of those battles had been easy, the memories of war carved on his body.

Suddenly feeling something soft and warm pressing against his back, Rentaro could not help but straighten his spine. Only after a while did he realize it was Hotaru's face.

"Sorry. I used to misunderstand you for so long, Rentaro."

Silence descended without warning.

In contrast to her cold exterior, Hotaru's inner feelings were actually very delicate and sensitive. Despite their short time together, Rentaro could still feel this.

—Indeed, at this rate...

Rentaro looked to the side at Hotaru's face, making a decision in his heart.

"It's okay. Let me sleep."

Without waiting for her answer, Rentaro switched off the flashlight and lay down, using his arms as a pillow.

He felt that Hotaru was hesitating to say something, staring at her own breath. In the end, she lay down with the sound of clothing friction.

Rentaro opened his eyes wide in the darkness, staring at the slightly pale ceiling.

Despite his body's utter fatigue, he could not allow himself to sleep just like that.

Who knew how long he spent staring at the darkness above. By the time Rentaro's arms were numb from serving as a pillow, he could sense Hotaru sleeping soundly from her breathing. Only then did he quietly seize the opportunity to sit up silently.

Reaching for the back pocket in his pants, he took out the small pen and note paper he had secretly bought at the convenience store when buying the flashlight. Tearing a piece of paper off, he wrote by touch in the darkness.

Although it was too dark to check the contents, he still placed the note next to Hotaru and silently stood up. Just as Rentaro was tiptoeing, intending to leave the ruins...

—A flashlight's beam suddenly shone over. Rentaro covered his face with his hand.

"...Where are you going?"

Hotaru's tone was extremely cold.

"....."

Rentaro could not find words to answer, only staring back at Hotaru in silence.

Noticing the note beside her pillow, Hotaru picked it up and looked down to read it.

"...What, is this?"

Hotaru's eyes narrowed sharply, the temperature of her voice completely frozen. Although she was using her usual monotone devoid of emotion, she was definitely angry right now. Rentaro's understanding of Hotaru Kouro as a person had reached the point sufficient for him to know this fact.

"I mean exactly what's written there. Let's go our separate ways here, Hotaru. I've written down the steps there. You go turn yourself in at the police and say that I forced you to help. Although I'm not sure how far the enemy organization has infiltrated the police, Inspector Tadashima at the Magata Police Station written there can be trusted."

"Stop joking around!"

"I'm not joking."

"Are you trying to escape from me?"

"Rather, you must escape from me."

After a moment's pause, Rentaro continued.

"Hotaru, you are currently on the edge right before the point of no return. Although I'm very happy that you believe I'm not the killer and it's the truth, the enemy consists of powerful figures who can even manipulate the police. Tomorrow's battle will surely be even more harsh than today's. If you still continue to accompany me, you'll surely lose your life this time."

Rentaro deliberately used a threatening and harsh tone of voice to scare her.

However, Hotaru's next reaction completely exceeded Rentaro's expectation.

"Even you're going to disappear on me like Mr. Kihachi, Rentaro?"

"What?"

Hotaru's expression was extremely sad. Her eyes, looking upwards, were blurry from tears.

"Mr. Kihachi was the same. Starting on a certain day, he became frequently distracted, hiding many things from me, often acting on his own... He wouldn't answer no matter how many times I asked him. I said my birthday was approaching and that I hoped he could at least accompany me on that day, but we ended up getting into an argument... The next day, I got up from bed and found a note from him. The note said that he was going to take care of everything before my birthday. But soon after that, the police called to tell me that Mr. Kihachi had been murdered."

"Well..."

This situation, completely beyond imagination, made Rentaro unable to say comforting words lightly.

"Right now, I still treat it as a dream that I've no idea how to confront. Feigning sleep, I get out of bed to follow Mr. Kihachi out the door. When Mr. Kihachi is shot, I shield him. Mr. Kihachi defeats the ambushing enemy and gives me the apology he didn't have a chance to say. Mr. Kihachi hugs me and whispers in my ear: we'll be together forever from now on."

Hotaru shook her head listlessly:

"I always wake up at this point. Seeing the excessively wide bed, I can't help but gnash my teeth in chagrin. So this time, I absolutely must protect my partner properly. Please, Rentaro, let me continue to take joint action with you. I want to find out exactly what caused Mr. Kihachi to act so differently, what the truth actually is. If you don't agree with me following you with a heart of vengeance, at least allow me to confront the future! Please, Rentaro!"

Their gazes met. After staring for who knew how long, Rentaro shut his eyes and slowly exhaled through his nose.

"I understand. I will take responsibility for filling the void in your heart after Suibara's death."

Slowly comprehending what his words meant, Hotaru's face brightened up. She originally opened her mouth, intending to say something but in the end shut her lips and lowered her head, barely managing to squeeze out a "thank you."

Weeping with joy, Hotaru extended her right hand.

"Then pleased to make your acquaintance again, Rentaro."

This was probably Hotaru's true personality. Thinking to himself that she was pretty cute when she smiled, Rentaro shook her hand tightly in return. The girl's delicate palm felt unbelievably dependable and also gave off a hot warmth and pulse.

"By the way, you said your birthday was approaching, so when is it exactly?"

"Oh, about that..."

Hotaru took out her cellphone from her pocket and said "perfect timing" then switched on the LCD screen's backlight.

The time showed 0:00, coincidentally just as the date changed.

"Today is my birthday. Now I've reached ten."

The rapid development made Rentaro speechless. He hastily searched for congratulatory words in his mind, but unused to congratulating others to begin with, he was unable to do anything but scratch his head helplessly.

Just at that moment, he suddenly sensed intense killing intent and picked up his Beretta and turned his head.

Hotaru also realized half a beat later. Her eyes instantly turning bright red as she unleashed her body's power.

"Rentaro, they're coming."

"Yeah."

The killing intent was coming from outside the carving factory.

However, that mass of killing intent did not invade in full force. Mixed among it was some kind of "hesitation" and it halted temporarily.

Perhaps unsure how to attack, but there was also the possibility they were waiting for backup.

Rentaro had a bad feeling.

No matter which possibility, staying in the carving factory would not be a wise choice.

"Let's go. Come with me."

After conferring with Hotaru, Rentaro raised his Beretta and suppressed his footsteps while moving.

The carving factory where Rentaro and Hotaru were staying for the night was a two-story building. Due to its location in the countryside, even if a fight suddenly broke out, there was no worry of the neighbors waking up from the noise and calling the police.

The annoying downpour from earlier now played a role in covering up the sounds of battle.

Rentaro and Hotaru moved quietly. Hiding behind a pillar, walking down the stairs where concrete was flaking off, leaning their backs against the walls left and right of the main entrance, they peered out slightly to see outside the building.

There were three figures standing under the rain without any attempt to hide themselves.

Rentaro narrowed his eyes from the Maglite flashlight's beam. As soon as he understood who those people were, his thoughts went blank for a while. Forgetting to hide, Rentaro rushed out and revealed himself.

"You guys... Why...?"

Illuminated by the Maglite, the three figures included a tall man and two girls.

The tall man was wearing a field jacket with a pair of honey-colored sunglasses.

The girl beside him was dressed all in black with a choker on her neck.

In contrast to those two, the remaining girl was standing as calm as lake water, her entire body clad in an exoskeleton resembling samurai armor.

Rentaro involuntarily took a step out of the building. The intense rain instantly drenched his clothes completely but he did not take notice.

He knew those three faces very well.

They were completely trustworthy comrades with whom he had shared life and death situations together in the past. In other words, warriors worth a hundred men each.

"I never expected we would meet again so soon."

Speaking in a stern voice, the girl taking a step forward in her ancient-style attire was precisely Asaka Mibu. Frequently closed tightly, her eyes opened slightly and looked at Rentaro with derision. Rentaro had fought alongside this female warrior in the past to defeat Aldebaran.

Why did she appear here now?

Due to losing her partner, the IISO should have taken custody of her.

Asaka presumably read the question in Rentaro's mind and threw him a cold glance.

"Arranged by the police, I am temporarily free from the IISO's control. This is in order to take care of the murderer fugitive and evil former civil security officer."

Carrying a Japanese sword in the past, Asaka was currently wielding a special weapon known as a "double sword." It was probably a technique inherited from her deceased Promoter. With the double sword touching the ground, Asaka said:

"I was originally looking forward for a reunion with you but never expected you to fall so low. Prepare yourself."

As though to continue Asaka's declaration, Tamaki Katagiri spat at the ground and glared from behind his sunglasses.

"The police ran over to hire us for a mission. Apart from murder and going on the run, you were even involved in a highway shooting and the Shiba Heavy Industries massacre! I've already seen the evidence."

"..."

The aforementioned police was most likely to be Hitsuma pulling strings in the shadows. Rentaro did not know what kind of fabricated evidence that guy had pulled out, but given the atmosphere, it was already impossible to reason with these three here.

During the crisis of the Third Kantou Battle, they had laughed, cried and entered the battlefield together as a group. But now, this friendship had been shamed and denigrated by Hitsuma. Rentaro could not help but seethe with killing intent.

Meanwhile, the other parts of his brain was analyzing the difference in combat potential between the two sides. The result made even Rentaro fall into despair.

Having served as the leader of their auxiliary team, Rentaro knew their capabilities more than anything.

"Rentaro, these people are your..."

Next to him, Hotaru was showing signs of unease.

Rentaro nodded firmly at her, asking her not to worry. The two of them were still going to fight alongside each other.

Asaka and Tamaki both felt that the trust built up during the battle against Aldebaran had been betrayed, hence they were furious. But among their group, only one person was speaking sorrowfully with a different attitude.

"Why won't you explain yourself? Come on, speak."

The girl was shaking her head, disregarding the fact that the twintails on the sides of her head were tousled. Yuzuki Katagiri.

"You're all covered in wounds...! You can't possibly win against us! Hurry and surrender! I don't want to fight you!"

"Raise your weapons."

"Huh?"

"What I mean is don't do anything unnecessary. I won't surrender."



Asaka and Tamaki's faces were shrouded in gloom, their eyes filled with disappointment.

Yuzuki took a step backwards with her face filled with despair.

"You..."

Extending his arm horizontally, Rentaro released various parts of his prosthetic arm.

At the same time, he unleashed his artificial eye. The black eyeball showed geometric patterns and started to rotate.

"I guess this is my first time introducing my title to you guys."

Entering the preparatory motions of the Tendo Style Martial Arts' "Blue Unity of Water and Sky stance," Rentaro stared at his opponents and said:

"Allow me to announce my name and title. Former member of the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force, Eastern Army, 787th Mechanized Special Forces, Rentaro Satomi of the New Human Creation Plan. I shall be your opponent."

"Ah..."

Shaking intensely, Yuzuki first looked down, looked up then looked down again. No one knew how many times she hesitated in her heart exactly.

"Just give up on that thought, Yuzuki!"

The elder brother's scolding seemed to finally push Yuzuki into making her decision. When she looked up the final time, her face was filled with hostility.

Tamaki's group spread themselves out to surround Rentaro and Hotaru.

The battle was about to break out any moment.

There was no chance of victory in a protracted battle. Rentaro decided that his side must make the first move if they were going to fight.

Memories of the trials they had faced together during past battles flashed through Rentaro's mind.

On this ground that had become muddy from the rain, Rentaro ignited the cartridge in his leg and rushed forward.

Part 5

Before Rentaro was about to throw himself into a deadly battle—

Even the pouring rain was still unable to wash away the smell of liquor shrouding the entire street.

Flashing red and green, the streetlights cast their light, filtered through the rain. On his way here, Shigetoku Tadashima's umbrella had bumped many times into staggering drunks.

Pimps clearly violating municipal ordinances with their persistent soliciting frequently made him annoyed. Suppose he was wearing his police uniform, these people would probably awaken instantly from their drunken stupor, but regrettably, he had almost no chance to wear his uniform after becoming a detective.

Holding the umbrella between his neck and shoulder, Tadashima spread out a paper map, rare nowadays, to search for his target destination.

Successfully finding the address he wanted, he looked up from the map, staring at the building opposite him through the rain obscuring his view.

"Is it... this place?"

Tadashima wondered if he had made a mistake but regrettably, the third floor's sign definitely read "Tendo Civil Security Company" in printed style writing.

He really wanted to make a scathing remark about how run down this building was.

Despite being touted as Tokyo Area's savior in the past, Tendo Civil Security had its office located in this dilapidated building where even lowbrow strip joints did not want to open their business there.

Despite feeling that the person he wanted to find probably would not be here at this time, Tadashima had already visited the residence in vain so all he could do was try this place.

Closing his umbrella, Tadashima tapped the stone floor to shake off water droplets, climbing up the stairs to reach the third floor. Stopping in front of the frosted glass door where the Tendo Civil Security Company sign was hanging, he pressed the doorbell.

After pressing the bell thrice and confirming there was no response, he was just about to turn around and leave when a figure could be seen moving behind the frosted glass.

Hence, he knocked on the door and tirelessly yelled "Excuse me, I'm from the Magata Police Station." After a while, a black-haired girl finally poked her head out accompanied by the sound of unlocking.

"Uh, have you any idea what hour it is—"

The girl stopped her teasing halfway then showed an expression of comprehension.

"You are Inspector Tadashima, isn't that right?"

Tadashima saluted and replied politely:

"I'm very for disturbing you this late. Regarding the Rentaro Satomi incident, may I take up a little of your time?"

Kisara seemed quite hesitant but finally, she seemed to decide on letting Tadashima in so she opened the door and took a step back.

Taking a closer look, Tadashima saw that she was dressed in a nightgown in the style of a one-piece dress.

Although the design was simple not glamorous, this was not a look that a young woman should show to anyone apart from her significant other.

The girl apparently was unconcerned by this, simply walking through the kitchen curtain with unsteady footsteps.

Her eyes, looking as hollow as glass beads, displayed a sense of beauty embodying utter nonresistance and fragility running the risk of breaking with the slightest touch. *I see, so this is the beauty who makes that Rentaro's heart flutter*, although Tadashima understood, he was also struck by other puzzling matters at the same time.

After the Kagetane Hiruko Terrorism Incident, Tadashima had encountered her at several crime scenes. This girl always displayed a strict attitude, ordering Rentaro around with her arms crossed and legs apart—Tadashima only recalled memories of her haughty attitude.

But now, she was like a different person. *So she's this kind of girl*, thought Tadashima.

At this moment, he noticed something that did not quite match this musty office.

The wedding dress of pure white, worn on the headless mannequin located on the side of the office. Furthermore, it was top quality stuff possibly worth tens of millions.

"I.. am getting married."

Tadashima looked back in fright just as Kisara walked out of the kitchen, carrying a tray with teacups.

"...Excuse me for being rude, but how old are you?"

"Sixteen."

"Oh I see... Legally speaking, there's no problem. But what about school?"

"Quitting school."

A hard and indifferent voice. The half-lowered eyes seemed to have forsaken something, her gaze fixated near Tadashima's feet.

"When is the wedding?"

"Tomorrow. Mr. Hitsu... My fiancé is in a hurry to hold the ceremony for some reason."

Tadashima almost doubted his ears.

"Hitsuma? Did you just say Hitsuma?"

"Yes..."

"Do you mean Superintendent Atsurou Hitsuma from the MPD?"

"You know him?"

"Rather than knowing him—"

Almost forgetting his original purpose, Tadashima was rendered speechless from the bottom of his heart. To think Hitsuma was about to get married yet he totally failed to sense it at all.

And to be so impatient as to hold the wedding tomorrow, with a young girl only sixteen years of age as well.

—Hitsuma was hiding this marriage from the outside world?
But why?

Kisara stood up and opened a drawer in the ebony office desk then returned with a golden pocket watch in her hand. The pocket watch's lid opened to show sparkling gemstones inlaid around the watch face. Clearly expensive stuff from a single glance.

"Mr. Hitsuma gave me this as a present on the day of the marriage interview. I don't have to worry about money ever again."

Kisara voice carried no joy and almost sounded like she was trying to convince herself in an attempt to give up on something.

Not knowing what to say, Tadashima simply raised the teacup silently to his lips—Then he could not help but scowl.

"Excuse me, forgive my extreme rudeness, but may I ask whether this black tea was prepared using cold water?"

"Huh?"

The brightness of rationality instantly lit up in Kisara's eyes behind the oil slick, her face going red.

"No way, I made a mistake again... And receiving a guest while dressed like this... I'm almost like a moron."

Kisara's expression suddenly twisted and she cried, covering her face with both hands.

"No way."

"Huh?"

Tadashima noticed something seemed to be breaking down inside her. Kisara's body shook intensely.

"No way... To be frank, I really don't want to marry Mr. Hitsuma... I really miss Satomi, Satomi... Why... Why did you have to die?"

Kisara sobbed nonstop, her shoulders shaking from sorrowful crying.

At this point, Tadashima finally figured out what that sense of dissonance was about.

For some reason, Hitsuma had kept Kisara in the dark regarding the fact that Rentaro was still alive. Furthermore, having seen the reports on the Plaza Hotel siege, she believed that Rentaro was already dead.

Tadashima was instantly filled with rage.

Indeed, it was necessary to hide from the citizens the secret that Rentaro was still alive, seeing as it pertained to the matter of police pride, but it should be okay to let her know, being Rentaro's close friend, after emphasizing that the truth must not be leaked.

However, Hitsuma was making this young girl marry him in an almost deceptive and abducting manner. What the heck exactly was going through his mind?

Just as Tadashima intended to tell Kisara the truth, his voice of reason told him to wait slightly.

This act would most likely be seen as betrayal to Atsurou Hitsuma.

Backing Hitsuma was his father—Superintendent-General Hitsuma was the leader of the police world. No one could predict Tadashima's future if he were to single out Tadashima.

However, Tadashima was sure he would regret in the future if he kept his mouth shut now.

—You're the one at fault here, Hitsuma.

Resting his elbows on the reception table's glass surface, Tadashima took a deep breath then exhaled.

"CEO Tendo, I hope you'll listen to me carefully. Although the truth was deliberately concealed to save the police's embarrassment, actually, Rentaro Satomi is still alive."

Crash—With the thunderous sound of shattering, Kisara dropped the teacup in her hand and was frozen in place.

Her eyes, staring extremely wide, slowly filled with tears while she covered her mouth with both hands.

—As though planned ahead of time with perfect timing, the sound of music suddenly came from somewhere.

A melody Tadashima had heard before. From the tone color, produced from steel gears striking a keyboard, one could understand it was a mechanical music box.

The sound's source could be found without deliberate searching.

"Why would this...?"

Staring at that object on the table for quite a while, Tadashima suddenly turned his gaze to the clock hanging on the wall whose hands just happened to be pointing at midnight exactly.

Chapter 5 - Wanderers of Purgatory

Part 1

The battle to the death, taking place under the darkness of night with mud splashing all around, was developing into a despairing and vicious fight.

Having fought them once before, Rentaro was very familiar with Tamaki Katagiri's varanium chainsaw that was merged with his gauntlets and Yuzuki Katagiri's territory of invisible threads. However, what exceeded his imagination was the fierce attacks executed by Asaka Mibu's petite body, slicing with astounding arm strength.

Her "double sword" consisted of an additional blade extending from the back of an ordinary sword's hilt. A strange weapon. Simply in terms of length, it could already match a spear. With dancing motions, Asaka twisted her hips and kept swinging the sword. Compared to the first strike, the second attack executed when withdrawing the weapon was more of a threat that one must not be careless with.

Not only that, using her arm strength as an Initiator, she was using the sword to knock the ground at her feet, producing shockwaves resembling earthquakes. The ground was shaking so much that Rentaro almost lost his footing.

At this time, Yuzuki and Tamaki would seize the opportunity to jump over for a sudden attack. Giving off terrifying growls, the chainsaw whizzed past Rentaro's ear.

In any case, Asaka must be neutralized first. Seeing an opening, Rentaro and Hotaru fired at the same time. The rapid gunshots were accompanied by scattering sparks and ricocheting bullets. Upon realizing that Asaka was spinning the double sword to deflect bullets, Rentaro could not help but feel stunned.

On further thought, Asaka's former IP rank was 275, the third strongest Initiator whom Rentaro had ever met after Tina and Kohina. There was no reason to underestimate her at all.

At the same time, Rentaro also gradually figured out how to categorize her abilities.

Her Gastrea factor probably belonged to the strength enhancing type. The armor-like exoskeleton further strengthened this trait of hers.

Whenever Rentaro kicked hard and made contact with the exoskeleton's shock absorbent fibers, Asaka would be insulated from the force, thus receiving almost no damage.

Rentaro's only way out would be to rely on a finishing move powered by his leg's cartridge, but his opponent also knew what he was capable of and always pulled back whenever Rentaro made the preparatory motions.

Hotaru's enhanced regeneration allowing her to revive from fatal wounds was totally impossible to use in this situation.

If Hotaru were to leave the front lines for a mere moment, Rentaro would not be able to handle the three opponents ganging up on him, thus entailing Rentaro's death. Understanding that, Hotaru carefully avoided taking on lethal blows, only providing cover fire from afar.

Disregarding Hotaru's base power of enhanced regeneration, she was too inferior to Asaka and even Yuzuki in all other respects.

Rentaro could not find any chance for victory.

In this situation where anyone would surrender, only Rentaro was continuing to fight while exhibiting movements that astounded Tamaki's group.

"Why!?"

Supposed to be in a situation of overwhelming advantage, Yuzuki screamed while shaking her rain-drenched hair.

Through the power of his artificial eye, Rentaro narrowly dodged three consecutive strikes from Asaka's double sword while blocking Tamaki's chainsaw fist and Yuzuki's kick from the side with his prosthetic arm and leg respectively.

Rentaro's left leg sank into the ground as he gritted his teeth and endured.

"Ohhhhhhhhhh!"

Mustering all his strength, he pushed his opponents' attacks back, causing the Katagiri siblings to stumble unsteadily.

The cartridge in his artificial leg detonated at the same time as the spent shell was ejected.

He stomped the ground as though trying to compress the soil underfoot. This created a massive depression on the muddy ground as a result, producing a violent shaking in the earth for the next instant.

Apart from Asaka who had realized Rentaro's intent and hastily retreated, Yuzuki and Tamaki were struck by the splashing soil and fell.

Ignoring those two, Rentaro dashed head on to attack. This battle could not possibly be won unless Asaka was defeated.

Preparing to engage, Asaka raised her double sword high. There were still twenty meters between her and Rentaro.

Originally thinking that she had gotten the wrong timing due to miscalculating his charging speed, Rentaro suddenly shuddered with terror.

In a split-second decision, he jumped to the side before hearing a heavy splitting sound that made his back froze in terror. The ground at his former position was now sliced into two.

Rentaro felt utterly terrified.

A ranged slash—Unlike Kisara, Asaka was slicing the ground through sheer brute force.

The next strike was swung horizontally.

Rentaro ducked down to evade the slash, only to hear a splitting sound behind him. Not daring to stop moving, he glanced back to see the second floor of the carving factory collapsing diagonally while giving off black smoke.

Rentaro suppressed the chattering in his teeth while running as hard as he could.

In his field of view, Asaka was gradually approaching. Once he stepped into her range of attack, the double sword's slicing would immediately become as changing and unpredictable as a hurricane's trajectory, attacking while slicing the soil underfoot.

Through the artificial eye's super high speed calculations, Rentaro desperately read the trajectories and dodged two attacks, then performed a feint to jump greatly to the right.

Asaka made a look of surprise.

—Now is the moment!

Rentaro was going to ignite the cartridge in his leg to make a comeback. But suddenly pulled backwards by an invisible hand, he lost balance.

Looking back, Rentaro could not help but stare wide-eyed.

"Crap—"

The streetlight, shaped like a lily of the valley, illuminated something iridescent, spider silk.

And using both hands to pull the spider silk was Yuzuki, lying on the ground with a look of hate.

When blocking her kick just now, his arm had gotten entangled in spider silk.

Without even time to gnash his teeth in chagrin, he saw Asaka's double sword thrusting to seize the opening.

Rentaro shut his eyes tightly. Was all hope lost?

Clang! With an acute sound, Asaka's double sword was sent flying.

The one most stunned was none other than Asaka herself.

The thrusting sword was struck from the side by a bullet coming from somewhere, producing an eruption of sparks before the weapon flew out of her hand.

That was not all. Almost at the same time, another bullet severed the highly ductile spider silk by searing it with high heat.

What amazingly accurate shooting.

"Rentaro!"

Without waiting for Hotaru's voice to reach his ears, Rentaro sprang into action, charging into Asaka's bosom.

With blinding brightness enough to lit up the dark night momentarily, the primer at the bottom of the artificial leg's cartridge was struck by the firing pin, detonating the gunpowder.

Rentaro unintentionally saw Asaka's face, looking as helpless as that of a lost child's.

Ten minutes later...

Rentaro stood still in the muddy ground, struck repeatedly by falling raindrops nonstop.

Lying beside him were two people.

On the other side of the exoskeleton's messily scattered fragments, Asaka Mibu was lying like a rag, her face dipped in muddy water.

Collapsed face up on the other side was Yuzuki Katagiri.

"Guh... Damn it... How could this happen?"

Hearing a cough, Rentaro turned his head to see Tamaki collapsed against a wall, wiping blood from the corner of his mouth.

After Asaka was defeated, the Katagiri siblings' weaknesses were thoroughly exposed.

They were using the tactic of avoiding the instantaneous thrust of Rentaro's leg cartridges. But conversely, it meant that Rentaro could also come up with tactics to counter the Katagiri siblings.

The siblings were both focused on close quarters combat. Although the gun at Tamaki's waist could handle mid-range battle, despite its astounding destructive power, the magnum revolver had massive recoil and low capacity, meaning it was almost exclusively used for Gastrea.

The magnum revolver was completely unable to oppose Rentaro's Beretta in a head on fight, given the disparity in cartridge capacity.

By taking shots at Tamaki, Rentaro and Hotaru forced Yuzuki to jump continuously to protect her brother. Attacking once she became fatigued was an easy task.

Once Tamaki was the only one left, there was even less of a problem.

Looking up through his honey-colored sunglasses, Tamaki glared at Rentaro with resentment towards a traitor.

Rentaro simply endured it with a cold expression.

"Kill me!"

Rentaro sent his fist into Tamaki's gut.

Tamaki groaned, muttering "bastard" then fainted as his head dropped down.

Rentaro observed him slightly then closed his own eyes, letting the rain pelt him like falling tears without moving at all.

"Rentaro..."

Rentaro looked back to see Hotaru standing her hands clasped in front of her chest, staring in his direction with unease.

Rentaro shook his head and walked over to her side.

"Let's go, this place is dangerous."

There were things he must handle.

Everything would be rewarded once the Black Swan Project was brought to light.

No matter how much terrible cursing and hatred I have to shoulder while heading along the path to this target, I must still—

Part 2

Rentaro shaded his eyes with his hand and looked diagonally up. Half of the rising sun in the east was blocked by the massive wall, but even though it was only morning sunlight, he still felt the scorching summer heat invading his skin.

The storm clouds had apparently disappeared with great swiftness. Today's weather was approaching blue skies without a single cloud.

Beneath the massive wall was a stainless steel marker reading "NO. 0013."

This black-chrome slab of rock was the Monolith. Walking throughout the night to avoid pedestrians, Rentaro and Hotaru had now arrived next to Monolith No. 13.

Looking behind them, one could see endless collapsed buildings and ruins whose roofs had been crushed. Slanted utility poles were entangled in wires, as though tracing out complicated patterns like a game of cat's cradle.

Luckily this early in the morning, not a single resident of this outskirt zone could be seen.

"Is it really here?"

"I think it should be right."

Hotaru answered immediately. Her voice sounded as cold as usual but Rentaro could sense excitement faintly.

"According to the deliveryman, there should be a manhole nearby. Let's search for it."

There was all kinds of stuff underfoot including aluminum cans and plastic rubbish. Using one's hands to search through them required a certain amount of courage. Rentaro used his boots to kick away objects that were moist with morning dew. Presumably due to rotting garbage, warm air rose up from underneath.

Timber, mortar and stuff like rusted nails were scattered all over the ground, making it hard to see the original surface.

Just as Rentaro was wondering in surprise whether the deliveryman had played for a fool, he finally found a new-looking manhole in among the rubbish.

Rentaro called Hotaru over. Upon seeing it, she immediately said "This must be the place."

"Why are you so sure?"

Using the tip of her foot, she motioned to the side of the manhole. Over there was a tiny star-shaped mark with feathers that one could easily miss. Rentaro felt his blood vessels contracting instantly.

Hotaru released her power and popped off the manhole cover. The emerging cold air attacked their spines while a pungent stench of filth from somewhere irritated their nasal cavities.

Rentaro shone his flashlight inside. Rusted pipes and the passage seemed to extend left and right.

Tossing down a Boston bag and army case that were filled with weaponry, Rentaro mustered his diminishing courage to climb rung by rung down the rusted ladder. Although he was the first to go down, the more he advanced down the manhole to where sunlight did not shine, the more he felt chilling terror as though he was entering a monster's mouth.

Naturally, there was no light inside. Only within the circle of light produced by a Maglite could they still see things.

Hearing weird noises resembling the moans of ghosts, Rentaro could only convince himself that they came from wind echoing inside the hollow space.

Hotaru illuminated the passages extending left and right in sequence.

"Towards the Monolith or in the direction we just came from. Which way do we go?"

"What if you had to pick one?"

"The way we just came."

"Then let's head towards the Monolith."

Hotaru kicked Rentaro in the knee. It really hurt.

"I hate you, jerk!"

Seeing Hotaru pouting angrily, Rentaro could not help but smile wryly.

"Anyway, let's go towards the Monolith and see. If we reach a dead end, we can always go the other way."

Hotaru also did not seem like she was angry for real. In the end, she nodded once.

Every step in the mud produced gloomy gurgling water sounds. The reflection of noise became more and more obvious the closer they approached the Monolith, while the turbulence in their hearts increased correspondingly.

Apart from meandering slightly at one point, the passage was almost in a straight line.

After walking roughly 200m or so, Rentaro and Hotaru stopped.

"Dead end... huh?"

A massive wall, roughly a meter wide was blocking their path.

Although they had not counted their steps, their current location was probably right under the Monolith.

Illuminated by a flashlight, the black chrome surface gave off a dark sheen. This was probably to prevent the invasion of Gastrea.

"Looks like we guessed the wrong direction."

"No, it's too soon to decide that."

"Rentaro?"

Intending to turn back and leave, Hotaru turned around again.

Feeling along the cold, smooth surface of the varanium, Rentaro found a small depression with his fingertips.

"Hotaru, come over and have a look."

He let Hotaru come to his side and touch it. She instantly made a look as though jumping in fright. On the varanium was a small hole less than two centimeters in diameter.

"Wasn't there a noisy sound resembling whistling just now? It was probably due to wind blowing across this hole. Also—"

Rentaro paused and shone the flashlight at the hole head on.

"Doesn't it look kind of like a keyhole?"

Originally feeling quite lost, Hotaru suddenly came to a realization. Covering her mouth with her hand, she hastily began searching her jacket pocket.

"Found it."

Hotaru took out the maple leaf-like key. This was taken from Swordtail and the two of them had no idea what it was for until now, a mysterious item.

Rentaro took a step backwards and Hotaru inserted the key and turned. With a slight unlocking sound, the wall was quietly opened, as though waving from inside to greet them.

"This is...!"

It was a dome-shaped space roughly the size of house. There was also something stopped there resembling a train. Its size was too small for a train but too big to call it a microbus.

"A light rail vehicle (LRV)...? Why is it in this kind of place?"

LRVs were next-generation surface trains that formed light and rapid transportation systems.

After entering the door, Rentaro noticed that the ceiling of this space was very tall. Behind the LRV, a tunnel and track kept extending into the distance.

Trying to use a flashlight to shine over there, Rentaro saw the back of the track shrouded by darkness and could not be seen clearly.

This was probably an LRV station.

"A correct guess huh...?"

"Yeah."

Following the tunnel probably led to the base of that whatever Five Wings Syndicate.

On further thought, this place was directly below the Monolith. Once they took the LRV, they would enter "unexplored territory."

For some reason, these people had bought up large amounts of trihydroxyzine, which was why the drug was identified inside the Gastrea.

Kihachi Suibara, Ayame Surumi, Kenji Houbara, Saya Takamura, Giichi Ebihara. Of the murders known to Rentaro, there were already five. This number was probably just the tip of the iceberg.

What secret did these dead victims know? Why must they be silenced at any cost? What was actually lying in wait for Rentaro and Hotaru, and what was the Black Swam Project about, having shed so much human blood already?

Considering the possibility of a trap, Rentaro carefully approached the LRV before finally boarding it.

Featuring suspended ring-shaped hand holds and seats, the LRV cabin was very similar to that of ordinary trains. The lack of dust meant that it had been used recently.

Wondering how to activate the LRV, Rentaro got into the driver's seat. Unexpectedly, the various parts of the dashboard was carefully labeled with explanations. After reading everything once, Rentaro was confident of driving the LRV.

Turning the key that was still inserted, he started up the machinery. Powerful headlights, beyond the likes of a Maglite flashlight, carved through the darkness ahead.

Placing his hand on the cold metallic surface of the control panel, Rentaro slowly operated. The speedometer instantly shot up, accompanied by intense vibrations. At the same time, the ring-shaped hand holds began to sway.

After Rentaro pushed the control rod to P5 gear and verified the train's acceleration, the LRV switched to constant speed mode after reaching 50 kilometers per hour.

Feeling someone behind him, Rentaro turned around to see Hotaru staring intently at the tunnel's interior wall.

"The inside of the tunnel seems to be varanium?"

Hearing her say that, Rentaro narrowed his eyes and observed.

"I see, so this tunnel was excavated using a shield machine."

"A shield machine?"

"It's a machine used for digging tunnels. There's something resembling a cutter bit in front. The latest models will line the tunnel wall with segmented materials, thus reinforcing the tunnel to prevent collapse. The segmented material used to line this tunnel was probably varanium."

"What amazing technology."

Hotaru's comment was very brief but Rentaro fully understood what she had not said out loud.

The Five Wings Syndicate needed to transport a shield machine here to assemble then excavate the tunnel before disassembling it and moving it away. Apart from laying tracks in the tunnel, there was also building an LRV system. Just the engineering alone was already an unbelievably monumental project.

There once existed a Cassiopeia Project in the past to use shield machines to excavate a giant underground rail network to link the five Areas of Japan. But apart from technical problems that were very hard to overcome, it was difficult to promote the project due to pressure from politicians and those with entrenched interests who did not want competition from the circulation of cheaper industrial products and agricultural crops from neighboring areas.

Managing to put this facility into operation before the state, how massive in scale of an organization was this Five Wings Syndicate exactly?

After the dialogue stopped, the mood instantly turned somber. All that could be heard was the sound of the vehicle moving over the tracks, causing the interior to shake slightly.

Placing his hand on the control panel to operate the headlights, Rentaro looked into the darkness that remained impossible to illuminate totally for quite a while when suddenly, he heard a metallic sound behind him. Looking back, he saw Hotaru opening the Boston bag and army case to prepare for battle.

Pulling the KRISS Vector submachine gun apart to inspect the chamber, Hotaru murmured nonchalantly at the same time:

"Rentaro, I've thought over it. I guess we shouldn't help each other, after all. If I get taken out, don't mind me and just continue to fight, Rentaro. Conversely, I won't mind you when I'm fighting."

It was almost like she had returned to her cold attitude when they first met each other. Offended, Rentaro was just about to retort when he suddenly realized why she was saying this now.

Perhaps she already had a feeling about what was going to happen to her next.

Something was waiting for the two of them soon.

Seeing the stop sign written with red words on the tunnel wall, Rentaro hastily moved the control rod to put on the brakes.

After inertia drove them forward, his body leaned back as though bouncing back. Rentaro almost lost his balance.

"It's here."

Next to the plain concrete wall at the stopping point was a door showing the color of rust. Above the door was a green emergency lightbox reading "Third Biochemical Research Laboratory."

"Research lab? This place is a research lab?"

"Where exactly is this place on a map?"

"We traveled at 50 km/h for twenty minutes so a simple calculation gives roughly 16km."

Naturally, this place was not protected by the Monolith's magnetic field. In terms of the ground surface, this also counted as entering "unexplored territory."

It was probably a real underground research lab. Suppose the facility extended above ground as well, how would it prevent the invasion of Gastrea?

Rentaro wiped the large amount of sweat on his palm onto his pants then grabbed the door handle while looking into Hotaru's face.

"We're going in."

After opening the door, the two of them entered.

The inside was very dark. A line of ceiling lights gave a faint blue glow like ghostlights, reflected on the silver-gray walls and floor. It felt very similar to a hospital after lights out.

Not a soul in sight. All they could hear was the sound of machinery operating somewhere. The air was filled with the smell of chemicals. The floor was swept very clean and one could surmise that it had been swept and maintained constantly until recently.

After passing through a large door, they arrived at a locker room. Name plates hanging on the absence board included ones like Firebird, Hucklebein or Squid, most likely codenames.

Every name plate was turned over, meaning no one had come to work. Today was probably not a public holiday. It very well could be that the Five Wings Syndicate had automatically abandoned this research lab, worried that Rentaro and Hotaru's investigation.

After entering the office, Rentaro became even more convinced of this possibility.

Scattered all over the floor was ash from hastily burnt paper as well as scraps from the paper shredder. This facility apparently still trusted hard copies in this era and so continued to use them.

Naturally, the Five Wings Syndicate knew about Rentaro defeating Hummingbird and Swordtail. Deciding that Rentaro's ultimate goal was the Five Wings Syndicate here, they probably decided to withdraw from this lab on their own.

Suppose his speculation was correct, then the truth Rentaro was seeking would no longer be here.

But contradicting this voice of reason from mental calculation, an unbelievable presence was reminding Rentaro.

It was almost as though someone was suppressing their breath, peeking at him from a dark corner in this facility—

The elevator they found along the way still seemed to work. However, Rentaro and Hotaru both instinctively feared traveling on exceptionally bright machinery.

From the floor display panel, they could tell that the facility consisted of one floor above ground and two floors underground.

Taking the staircase to the second floor underground, Rentaro felt unusually cold air.

Following the passage and walking to the end, they finally reached a cleanroom.

Here, simple sterilization could be performed and protective suits were hanging on the wall, but there was nothing to stop Rentaro and Hotaru from barging in directly.

After activating the interior partition, they saw what looked like a thick wall on the other side. On this wall was a futuristic looking control panel. Rentaro felt as though he had entered a space station.

Only after the previous partition that they passed was shut did the new partition activate.

In front of them was a massive corridor but scattered in the depths of the dark space ahead were unbelievable things.

"Cages...?"

Rectangular cages were embedded in the walls on the sides of the corridor. Not just one or two but all along the two sides of the massive corridor were cages as far as the eye could see.

The problem was the size of the cages. These cages were clearly too big to be used for holding rats or rabbits used for animal experiments. Also, weak breathing could be heard coming from inside the cages.

The cages contained certain creatures. And not just one or two. Something was holding its breath, gazing in their direction.

Rentaro was about to take a step towards the dark corridor when a tug on his jacket hem made him look back, only to see Hotaru shaking her head at him. Although Rentaro could fully empathize with what she was feeling, he could not turn back now that he was here. No matter what, he must understand this.

"Let's confirm the truth here."

Rentaro walked lightly, following the corridor. A sense of regret was eating away at his mind as though he had stepped into a parallel world.

After walking for a while, although he tried to peer into the cages, he still could not see what was inside them.

With a trembling hand, Rentaro switched on his Maglite flashlight and shone it towards the nearest cage.

Bright red eyeballs were illuminated. The instant they reflected the flashlight's brightness, the thing instantly charged madly.

Apart from deafening barking noises, the creature was smashing violently against the cage, gnawing like mad with sharp teeth with scraping noises. In a panic, Hotaru rushed over and fired her submachine gun.

"Geeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!"

Making a weird noise like a strangled rat, the creature retreated into the depths of the cage. As though the walls were exploding, all the cages gave off loud noises. Frightened by the gunshots, the creatures in the other cages kept screaming and angrily smashing into their cages.

"Hurry and escape!"

Without waiting for an answer, Rentaro grabbed Hotaru's hand and rushed through the corridor.

Only after using his shoulder to push open door on the opposite end and jumping inside did Rentaro look back, panting.

"Those things just now couldn't be that, right?"

"Right."

After waiting for his pulse to calm down, Rentaro approached a cage in trepidation.

Again, he shone a light into it.

There was a slimy reflective surface. Skin resembling rotting flesh was secreting slime. In the depths of the cage was a group of strange creatures making cursed screams.

"These are all Gastrea?"

"Ignoring that for now, let's look at this first..."

Rentaro was shining his light not at the Gastrea but the cage itself.

Hotaru's body went tense as though she had been hit by a bullet.

"Cages made of varanium... No way, how could this be possible?"

The vast majority of Gastrea were averse to varanium. If confined in a space made of varanium, they would weaken and die.

This research lab was probably abandoned within the past few days but the Gastrea locked in these cages were probably here far longer than that.

Even a Stage IV would be rendered into a half-dead and pitiful state after being locked inside this type of cage for half a day. How did these things survive?

However, all they could do now was put their questions aside and keep going forward.

Inside a small room the size of three tatami mats and possessing level P4 biohazard standards, there was an octopus monster with entwined tentacles making weird noises while smashing itself against the glass window.

After entering a surgery room and seeing the tragic state on the surgical table, Rentaro gave up further investigation and closed the door. This research lab was carrying out all sorts of Gastrea experiments. No doubt about this point. The researchers probably gave up on euthanizing these Gastrea and simply fled.

Rentaro had witnessed many overwhelmingly filthy scenes previously but somehow got the feeling that he still had not seen any decisive evidence.

That should be the backbone of the Black Swan Project, presumably located somewhere in this facility.

After checking out various parts of the facility, they finally came to a gigantic door.

According to the map pasted in the corridor, the space behind this door was as big as a concert hall.

The doorplate read "Incubation Chamber."

"We're going in."

Rentaro said that partially as encouragement before operating the control panel on the side to open one layer of partitioning. After going in, there was another partition. With a pressurized sound, the partition Rentaro was filled with anticipation for activated. A strong blast of cold air also blew towards them from underfoot, turning into mist.

Those things finally came into view.

Bulging yellow-green spheres filled with water were quivering as though from fetal movement.

The bulging bags were surrounded by a network of blood tubes and a huge number of these things were suspended densely from the ceiling. Every bag was big enough to contain a person. Contained in the thin translucent bags were all sorts of creatures including a multi-headed fishman, a beetle with warts growing all over its exoskeleton, and a giant string-like organism that one could not tell if it was a snake or a threadworm.

The dense collection of suspended yellow-green bags looked strangely like Muscat grapes. Inside the giant dome-shaped space were many bunches of Muscat grapes as fruit, each one containing a Gastrea inside.

It was almost like a large number of grapes growing on a trellis.

'—The vineyard must be burnt down.'

Despite never having heard Dr. Surumi speak while alive, Rentaro heard her voice echoing emptily in his mind.

"N-No way... Impossible!"

"What do you mean, no way...!?"

Hotaru also seemed to realize the truth, only that she continued to pretend not to notice. This attitude of denial was somehow making Rentaro furious.

"This is incubation! Incubating Gastrea! And not just ordinary Gastrea."

Although Rentaro knew that she was the wrong target for venting his anger, given the bloody terrifying scene before his eyes, he could not help but lose self-control.

"Once these incubating Gastrea develop and mature, they are then locked into those varanium cages we saw earlier. These things are not ordinary Gastrea...! They've been modified to have resistance against varanium, which is why they don't die even when locked in cages made of varanium. Damn it... So that's what's going on."

Didn't Sumire say before?

'People originally believed that all birds called swans were white, but after black swans were discovered in Australia, a huge uproar was raised amongst ornithologists. In the world that originally believed all swans to be white, no one could predict the existence of black swans.'

'Thereafter, the term "black swan theory" was coined to describe phenomena where people suffer losses and are caught unprepared by what they deemed to be impossible due to excessive adherence to long-term predictions made according to common sense.'

'A prediction like "since these fields have produced bumper crops for a decade continuously, this area will be submerged in a flood" would be considered nonsense, wouldn't it?'

Indeed, no one could imagine there existed Gastrea with resistance against varanium. If these things were to multiply in large numbers through infections, they would eventually take over human habitats completely, destroying nations and all of humanity to establish a Gastrea empire.

This was the Black Swam Project. How ugly. How filthy. Rentaro could hardly believe how it was possible for fellow humans to attempt such a thing.

"But for what purpose is the Five Wings Syndicate conducting this kind of research...?"

Rentaro shook his head.

"An infection break out can be started artificially just by having a large number of these 'varanium-resistant Gastrea.'"

"Impossible! Gastrea won't listen to humans no matter how you rear them and there's no way to give them orders. Experiments trying to control Gastrea by embedding electrodes in their brains have also failed. If these imprisoned Gastrea were all released at the same time, they'd only scatter like wild animals."

"Trihydroxyzine."

Hotaru's entire body tensed up instantly.

"But there's still one unresolved issue, right? Why would the Five Wings Syndicate buy up massive quantities of trihydroxyzine circulating on the market even at the risk of getting discovered? This is drug for causing a powerful sedated state. Although I don't know the details, it looks like that by putting these reared Gastrea into a sedated state, they can be forced to attack the Tokyo Area or conditioned to gravitate to the Tokyo Area, right? Think about it, aren't there precedents? During war, people are conditioned to develop reflexes, training them to shoot with their gun as soon as they spot the target."

"Conditioning" was the term referring to the training of animals to take particular action in response to specific control stimulus.

For example, by putting lab rats into a maze and giving them food to condition the rats to memorize the maze, in the end, the rats would become able to exit the maze with almost no hesitation.

If humans were conditioned to accept training so as to fire immediately upon seeing the target, they would develop a mechanism to pull the trigger without requiring conscious will, greatly increasing their efficiency in causing enemy casualties.

This was what commanders liked to see most in wars, but it also caused soldiers to develop the bad habit of killing targets immediately even when it was not necessary, resulting in severe posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)—In other words, self-reproach for murder was causing successive cases of mental instability in soldiers. The price of that was incomparably high.

These experiments proved that even as higher animals, humans could still develop conditioning. It went without saying that Gastrea...

"But... even if it's possible in theory, what are the chances of everything going according to plan in practice?"

"That's why they need to experiment."

Rentaro looked at the center of the dome-shaped structure. The vines and Muscat grapes suspended from above had attracted all of his attention, which was why he initially did not notice that in the center of the dome, roughly twenty meters in diameter, there was also a massive thing extending upwards as a complicated bundle of pipes and wires, reminiscent of a tree trunk.

Indeed, this was like a mechanically constructed tree. Those things resembling pipes were probably what supported the entire grape trellis from above.

"The Five Wings Syndicate probably releases the Gastrea raised here in order to conduct experiments, testing to see if they are able to sneak into the Tokyo Area for real. That's why they added those winged pentagrams as a mark in order to avoid mixing them up with other Gastrea. Furthermore, they prepared a team beforehand to be in charge of retrieving corpses. The Gastrea you defeated with Suibara was definitely one of these 'varanium-resistant Gastrea.' Originally supposed to be swiftly retrieved before getting handed over to Dr. Surumi for dissection, but in the end... Dr. Surumi discovered something so she found Suibara and the two of them investigated together, finally uncovering truth that was not meant to be known. Hence, the two of them were silenced."

—Suibara, was this what you didn't get a chance to convey to me back then?

Sudden sobbing made Rentaro look back to see Hotaru kneeling on the floor, covering her face with both hands.

Emotionally, she shook her head and cried with sorrow.

"I-I can't believe it was for this kind of thing that Mr. Kihachi... I was very happy with just Mr. Kihachi by my side. But in the end—!"

Indeed. She was another victim of the Black Swan Project.

Just by releasing all of these "black swans," the Tokyo Area would be destroyed. Suibara was determined to raise the alarm against this crisis, even though he knew that exposing this affair would greatly endanger himself.

If Rentaro and Hotaru were to submit now, then the secret Suibara and the others gave their lives to expose would sink into the shadows once more. The Five Wings Syndicate would resume their demonic experiments somewhere. Rentaro absolutely forbade that.

All sorrow and tragedy began here. In that case, let everything here come to an end.

Rentaro slowly shook his head and looked up at the giant tree.

"Hotaru, I was wrong. I originally wanted to sneak into the enemy's secret base in order to find evidence to bring back so as to clear my name. But now, it's no longer a matter of proving my innocence. Not a single one of the Gastrea remaining in this research lab must be allowed to leave. They must all be exterminated here."

"But how do you plan on doing that?"

Rentaro looked up at the center of the incubation chamber.

With the giant tree of pipes in the center, there were passages radiating outwards from there. These passages used construction scaffolding directly without any decoration. Rentaro mustered his determination to climb it, his boots clacking against the metal.

Looking down from the narrow bridge resembling a catwalk, Rentaro could see white gas puffing out of the giant tree's "root" then turning into dense cloudy fog. The cold air he had been feeling since a while ago was probably the result of extremely low-temperature liquid nitrogen evaporating. If he fell down from here, consequences were unthinkable.

Reaching the center of the dome, Rentaro examined the machinery that seemed to be the equipment for controlling this vineyard. It might be possible to kill the incubating Gastrea by destroying this equipment.

How big of an organization was the Five Wings Syndicate exactly for them to be capable of building such a system? How far had it infiltrated the Tokyo Area?

Fortunately, Rentaro was on alert at all times for sudden enemies behind him, hence very early on, he already noticed the killing intent from someone trying to snipe from behind.

He mobilized his prosthetic arm. The internal thruster pushed the cartridge then the extractor ejected the spiraling shell.

Tendo Style Martial Arts, Type 1, Number 3—

"—Rokuro Kabuto!"

Tracing out a circle, his fist swung violently, making a powerful impact with the object that was approaching Hotaru. Within a blink of the eye, a shockwave tore through the air, producing a loud rumble while deflecting the flying object—a rifle bullet.

Rentaro oriented himself towards where the bullet had come from. Hotaru only noticed after half a beat that she was being sniped and frantically shifted her gaze.

"Welcome, Satomi. I knew you'd come."

A figure walked over slowly from the other side of the passage, producing clacking sounds in the process.

Featuring a straight bridge of the nose and calm eyes, the face of this young man who was dressed in a standing-collar school uniform bore a twisted smile. Putting aside a sniper rifle whose muzzle was smoking, he walked over with his hands in his pockets.

"Yuuga, Mitsugi..."

Rentaro muttered that name in a voice full with hatred, feeling no surprise inside at all. After all, he originally expected this guy to show up eventually to get in the way.

Apart from that, Rentaro also fully understood that he could not possibly prevail over the Five Wings Syndicate without defeating this guy.

Staring at Yuuga, Rentaro whispered to his companion at the same time:

"Hotaru, I've got a favor to ask. Could you help take the explosives from this bag and place them at critical locations around the facility? I'm going to take this guy out."

"Me too—"

"Please. I must decide things between me and this guy."

Hotaru still seemed to have more to say, but she reluctantly closed her mouth and bowed her head.

"...I wish you good luck, Rentaro. Please don't die no matter what."

Leaving only these words behind, Hotaru carried the backpack in her arms and ran away as though trying to shake off her hesitation.

After glancing sideways to see her disappear through the door behind him, Rentaro turned to face forward again.

A lonely silence flowed past until it was filled by the puffing of mist from coolant. Rentaro almost felt an illusion as though he was on bridge deep in the mountains where mist was hanging in the air.

Rentaro lowered his voice and asked:

"I've gotten a grasp on everything, Yuuga Mitsugi. I'm gonna expose all the shit you guys are doing."

"Please have mercy."

"What is the Five Wings Syndicate's goal? Selling 'varanium-resistant Gastrea' to third world terrorists?"

"Sell? Why must we do that? Of course we're going to use them."

Rentaro felt troubled, not understanding what he meant for a while. His rational mind was refusing to comprehend these words.

"You said... use?"

"Indeed."

Yuuga spread his hands and told Rentaro:

"We of the Five Wings Syndicate, our goal is precisely hegemony of the world's administration."

Yuuga walked smugly circling around Rentaro and explaining:

"Although I'm not too sure what things were like before the war, Japan's five Areas are currently major producers of varanium. This, combined with the fact that our nation is founded on science and technology, makes us one of the few rich countries in the world. Given how the various countries of the world have lost their ability to help themselves, hiding in caves like hibernating bears, our goal is to replace them to establish order and cleanse the globe of Gastrea. To this end, we must first unify the world and bring everything under our control."

"..."

"What's tragic is that people in the world are divided by race, religion and mindsets. Even if we want to issue commands, there might be many countries that refuse to obey, right? In order to make the world cooperate in unity, the disobedient countries must be eradicated. This is what the 'varanium-resistant Gastrea' were born for."

"What... Eradicate? What's the difference between this and conquering the world?"

"Completely different. We are trying to create a world without Gastrea by leading the world towards a better direction. In the process of doing so, we must supplant the superpower that considers itself the world police while we make various bigger and smaller nations submit to us. Supposed to be the most advanced species, the social animal called humans are regrettably still unable to create governing models without a ruling class. Despite intelligent brains, humans' tendency to follow authority blindly makes them no different from ants, hence some kind of target needs to serve as a queen ant in order to educate the masses properly. The one ruling all from above is precisely the Five Wings Syndicate, recruiting patriots from Japan's five Areas and overseas, gathering them all under one ideology to become an organization transcending parties and states."

"Are you for real?"

"At least, those of higher rank than me all believe so. Hence, that is why we are the shock troops for transcending the 'New Humans' in order to build the 'New World'."

Rentaro drew his handgun with lightning speed and fired at Yuuga's feet. A bullet gouged a hole in his sole.

Acquiring the same temperature as his rage, the muzzle jumped with scorching heat at the end of his arm.

"Stop joking around... Just for something like that, Suibara was killed because of that? For this kind of world chaos, Hotaru must be made to cry?"

Yuuga shrugged with indifference.

"I've heard enough nonsense already. You and I will never get along... Let's bring an end to this right now!"

Rentaro's artificial left eye and both of Yuuga's eyes released their power at the same time and started calculating.

"What a wonderful day it is today. Come, let's do it. Between the New Human Creation Plan and the New World Creation Plan, let's see which one is the proper evolution of mankind!"

Rentaro and Yuuga finally lit the fires for the final battle.

Just at this moment, a jet of mist even more denser than previously obscured their figures.

Rentaro stopped his artificial eye's predictive calculations. However, the enemy was facing the same conditions as well.

Taking Tendo Style Martial Arts' Type 1 Number 5 stance, Tiger Prevails Over Heaven, Rentaro charged.

Even without using the internal cartridge, Rentaro was still able to sweep the curtain of white mist away by swinging his arm at almost the speed of sound. In the end, the one staring wide-eyed in surprised turned out to be Rentaro himself. He did not find his enemy.

In that instant, he felt an intense pain from the side of his head, causing his vision to immediately go dark.

"Guh!"

Taking a closer look, he found that Yuuga was withdrawing his leg after having circled around to his side and unleashing a kick.

Held in Yuuga's right hand was a large knife similar to a dagger. When swung to perform follow up attacks, the trails were almost like the afterimages left behind by lightning.

Operating his artificial eye's calculation abilities to the point that it felt like it was about to burn up, Rentaro barely managed to see the blade's trajectory and twist his neck to evade. Having entangled the enemy's elbow, he twisted the arm in an attempt to knee the enemy in the lower jaw, but regrettably, he was blocked by the enemy's gun.

Yuuga's face, twisted in hatred, was very close to him. When his face suddenly approached, Rentaro almost saw stars erupt from his own head.

By the time Rentaro noticed he had suffered a headbutt, he was already having a nose bleed and had stumbled many steps.

His view shook. Nose blood was dripping noisily on the metallic floor, splashing in a terrifying manner.

When Rentaro looked forward again, Yuuga's figure vanished in the dense mist again.

Rentaro panicked for a moment but soon suppressed the feeling.

Using his eye to capture the enemy was not going to work.

The person as the gun. The gun as the person. During the battle against Tina, Rentaro had come to understand "the realm where gun and person became one" even to the point of not only his own gun but also gaining full awareness of the enemy's trigger bar rubbing against the frame and the sound of the hammer descending.

The instant he took a jump to the right, muzzle flash was expelled from the other side of the dense mist. Rentaro heard the deafening sound of explosives detonating.

"What?"

Unexpectedly, both of them managed to evade bullets without using their artificial eyes.

Rentaro did not miss the chance to close in during Yuuga's surprise. By the time Yuuga wanted to aim the gun's muzzle at Rentaro again, both of them were already in melee range.

With both hands free, Rentaro stepped on the floor hard with both feet and yelled out.

"Tendo Style Martial Arts, Type 1, Number 15—!"

The cartridge made a destructive sound then ejected the shell. Powered by thrust on a cheating level, the fist of supervaranium attacked fiercely upwards from below. This punch was akin to a wrecking ball swung by a construction site crane. Not only did it exceed the sound barrier but it also blew away the white mist.

Yuuga frantically crossed his arms to defend but it was futile.

"Carp in a Lake up in the Cloudy Mountains! —Roll your ass away!"

The hook punch flying upwards fractured the left arm Yuuga used for defense, sending him flying almost ten meters away.

Things were not over yet. Orienting his leg cartridge towards the back and activating the thruster once, Rentaro followed up with an attack.

Rising into the air at the same height as Yuuga's parabolic trajectory, he then detonated a leg cartridge, resulting in another intense explosive sound while the golden shell spiraled in the air.

This move was "Hidden Zen: Black Hurricane" of the Tendo Style Martial Arts, Type 2, Number 16.

"Rahhhhhh!"

Executing a spinning kick in the air, Rentaro struck Yuuga who was still flying from the first attack. This caused Yuuga's vector to reverse, crashing down instead. Rentaro heard his body colliding intensely with the metallic floor, producing a crisp sound. However, this alone was not enough to dissipate the impact completely. Yuuga bounced many times until rolling over to the railing which stopped him from falling.

—How's that!?

It would not be strange for an ordinary person to have all bones fractured from the first attack's hook punch. Even if this guy was a mechanized soldier and relatively sturdier...

"Gah!"

Rentaro stared wide-eyed again from surprise.

Just as he noticed the opponent's body twitch before making a move, Yuuga grabbed the slanted railing and got up. This time, Yuuga did not say anything. His messy hair covered one eye while his other eye was rotating as he glared at Rentaro.

"I'm gonna kill you."

"...This is payback for that time at the hotel."

"I can't lose to Tendo Style a second time!"

—A second time?

With a roar, Yuuga drew two combat knives from his waist then roared at the sky again.

Rentaro's instincts told him not to get near Yuuga. Pulling out his weapon from its holster, Rentaro pulled the trigger twice. The 9mm bullets produced powerful recoil.

Just as Rentaro thought things were done, Yuuga's body swayed lightly and dodged.

The enemy was an artificial eye user as well. As long as it was captured within visual range, bullet trajectories could be predicted using the artificial eyes' calculations.

Yuuga lowered his posture and dashed towards Rentaro. The swirling of white mist behind him was an indication of how astoundingly fast he was going.

As much as Rentaro tried to aim the Beretta again, Yuuga suddenly threw a knife. The knife flew at the Beretta's muzzle, causing Rentaro to lose aim and pull the trigger accidentally. The muzzle instantly spewed vicious flame. The remaining knife immediately flew with lethal speed towards Rentaro's waist, glinting with heavy light.

Feeling it was too late to dodge, Rentaro had no choice but to lower his center of gravity, blocking the deadly weapon forcibly with his prosthetic arm of supervaranium.

The instant the two collided, his entire body felt a massive impact. The soles of Rentaro's boots slid intensely on the floor. The friction caused the soles to give off a burnt smell.

Screech—The knife's blade made earsplitting noises of friction. By the time he came to his senses, Rentaro noticed the blade was spinning mere centimeters from the tip of his nose.

He had blocked the enemy's surprise attack in the nick of time.

Yuuga's face, twisted with hatred, was still within the reach of Rentaro's breath.

But even by this point, Rentaro still misjudged Yuuga's threat.

Yuuga was only holding a knife in his right hand.

Using his left hand, he pushed a small spherical object towards Rentaro.

Feeling an intense chill as though his heart was being held in an icy hand, Rentaro groaned.

He had some impression of that spherical object.

—An HG-86 mini-grenade.

The safety pin was already pulled off. Using this thing while they were so close together, it was only natural that both sides was going to receive fatal wounds.

—A suicide bombing?

While Rentaro's entire body was pierced by terror, his body automatically reacted in desperation. Using his free elbow, he struck the grenade away.

The grenade fell from the bridge. In the next second, the detonation produced a strong shockwave.

Yuuga used his freed left hand to deliver a vicious blow to Rentaro in the stomach while he was lifting his elbow and neglecting defense.

Only after half a beat did Rentaro realize Yuuga's intent.

Crap, this palm is—

Seeing Yuuga's grinning lips, Rentaro felt terror rush along his spine.

"Vairo Orchestration! Become crushed and scattered!"

In the next instant, Rentaro's entire body was filled with unimaginable pain.

"Gahhhhhhhh!"

His vision torn apart, the intense pain was almost making Rentaro's body disintegrate.

Kicking reflexively, he pulled back from the enemy.

His view tilted, Rentaro was kneeling down in pain. Checking his wound, he felt his innards almost boiling, suffering unprecedented hemorrhaging damage.

With a wave of nausea, he vomited blood together with chunks of shattered organs. The black blood splashed on the floor in a terrifying manner.

Rentaro gnashed his teeth in despair while looking up at Yuuga.

Yuuga was also heavily injured, finding it difficult to stand. That was only natural for Rentaro had used up two cartridges on him just now. The fact that Yuuga was still alive could only be attributed to a miracle.

"We were created ten years ago during the Gastrea War only for the purpose of protecting the world! But we ended up trying to kill each other, don't you find that very paradoxical!?"

Yuuga waved horizontally.

"I only believe in Professor Grunewald! That's my way of life!"

"I've never gotten used to a mechanized body. The prosthetic limbs always need to be replaced every time I grow and the intense pain has never ended."

"Same here."

"There were times when I really wanted to die."

"Same here."

"It's not too late for you yet! I don't want to kill you."

"I can't understand your way of thinking! Why can't those who are destined to be rulers rise up!? We are the ones preordained by the heavens! If you were to ask what problem exists that we cannot solve, then the only thing remaining that we cannot overcome is entropy! You too are an ultimate killing machine created by Sumire Muroto, right? Our hands were made to cause chaos and destruction. You and I are birds of a feather!"

"Shut up! I'm not the same as you! The Doctor gave me this artificial hand so that I can connect with other people!"

"That's just twisted logic!"

"Damn bastard...!"

Rentaro yelled while standing up, all covered in blood. Every breath he took, he felt intense pain in his lungs.

Whoosh—It was the sound of the device puffing out white mist persistently. But heard through Rentaro's ears, it felt like his own heartbeat.

Yuuga lowered his waist and made a stance. This was a unique preparatory motion with right and left arms crossed.

Rentaro also prepared to attack. Tendo Style Martial Arts' "Blue Unity of Water and Sky stance." Now was not the time for defense. There was no retreat.

The artificial eyes of both sides activated what could potentially be their most fierce and final super high-speed calculation, erupting sparks nonstop in the depths of their views.

The two held their breath and glared at each other. This could be said to be concentration of the highest level. Once unleashed, the fists of assured death targeting each other would definitely end one of their lives.

The silence was suddenly broken by a girl's voice coming from one side. It was Hotaru.

"Rentaro!"

With this serving as the signal, Rentaro and Yuuga kicked the floor in almost perfect unison down to a split second. Igniting a third cartridge, Rentaro accelerated intensely. With supersonic speed surpassing a jet engine's, he closed in on Yuuga.

Then Rentaro ignited an arm cartridge. His nostrils were scorched by the intense smell of gunpowder.

Rentaro swung his fist at his target. Yuuga's fist was also approaching him.

This was Tendo Style Martial Arts, Type 1, Number 8, Flaming Fan.

An intense clash between two cutting-edge super technologies, the cartridge and the ultrasonic vibration device, resulting in an explosive shockwave that blew away all the white mist the surroundings at once, causing the floor to collapse and the incubation chamber's mainframe to emit sparks.

"Hahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

"Guh... Rahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Rentaro's fist and Yuuga's palm collided with each other, vying for supremacy. Although Rentaro was utterly exhausted and had no idea how the opponent's ultrasonic vibration device worked, he still used his prosthetic hand to take on the vibrations, causing his supervaranium fist to crack.

Howling like a wild beast, Rentaro ignited all of his remaining cartridges.

"Unlimited—Burst—!"

Even a particle accelerator experiment would never involve two objects with such massive energy colliding with each other, right? The result was a crisp shattering sound that Rentaro had never heard before in his entire life.

Suddenly feeling as though his neck was being pulled back, Rentaro was sent flying away due to the reaction force from magnetic repulsion. After bouncing on the floor a few times, he smacked his back against the giant tree in the center of the incubation chamber. Gritting his teeth to endure the intense pain, his teeth almost cracked, but Rentaro still jumped right back up on the spot in the end.

However, he could not find his enemy.

Picking up his Beretta, he pulled out the dagger embedded in it for his own use.

Looking down from the edge of the bridge he finally realized why his opponent had not followed up with an attack.

Amidst the curtain of mist from the vaporized super low-temperature liquid nitrogen, he could only catch a faint glimpse of the "root" of the pipes and wires. And the unfortunate Yuuga had fallen down there.

The temperature under the bridge must be extremely low. Even the blood dripping from Yuuga was frozen and his clothing was stuck, frozen to the pipes, immobilizing him.

Rentaro held his Beretta silently and aimed at him. Yuuga stared back with eyes filled with hatred. Seeing him thoroughly refusing pity through his eyes, Rentaro gave up on trying to persuade him with words.

Shifting his aim to the side, Rentaro shot the storage tank next to Yuuga.

Instantly, out flowed a liquid at negative 196 degrees centigrade, enough to freeze anything. Evaporating into a hazy mist, it attacked Yuuga.

"Gahhhhhhhhhh!"

Rentaro closed his eyes.

His only consolation was that the instantly expanding gas turned into mist, obscuring the decisive moment.

Finally, all he heard was freezing sounds then nothing at all.

The intense cold air blew across Rentaro's hair with strong wind. This space was once again shrouded by the mist of the underworld.

"Rentaro..."

Refusing to let Hotaru finish what she was trying to say, Rentaro walked past her directly.

"It's over. Let's go."

Ascending the stairs to walk from the second floor underground to the ground floor, Rentaro found a beam of light coming in and hastily raised his hand to protect his eyes.

Totally unaware due to moving about underground all this time, he found that noon had already gone by on the surface.

Leaving from the facility's back door, he found the surroundings to be small hills. The research lab was built in the central depression of a basin.

"Looks like that's what's blocking Gastrea from invading this facility."

"I see, they set up mobile Monoliths used for fortifying positions..."

This was a type of mini-Monolith whose size could be described as "very cute" at 2m wide and 3.236m tall.

Furthermore, the effects were limited. To be precise, it was only effective against Stage I Gastrea. Against Stage II, it would be like a bell for scaring bears and for more advanced Gastrea, its effects would be no better than a lucky charm.

This type of equipment was originally created to be used in "unexplored territory" with hired CivSec pairs to protect excavating personnel in varanium mines.

Perhaps Swordtail, Hummingbird and others were in charge of bodyguard duties to protect this research lab?

"Hotaru, where are the explosives?"

"Already installed on the building's main support pillars. They can be detonated any time. I also took the chance to take photos in the facility, so evidence should be plenty."

"Well done, then let's hurry far away to watch the building's demolition."

"Hold on a sec. If we demolish the building now, we won't be able to take the underground rail back."

Rentaro shook his head slowly.

"Yuuga is probably an assassin sent to ambush us in the research lab but we ended up taking care of him instead. Those New World guys have their heartbeat monitored by higher-ups so the enemy camp already knows that guy died. No one can guarantee that the underground rail won't have any explosives planted beforehand for the return trip. Although it's a pain, it looks like we'll have to walk back. And because of that, before we present evidence to expose the Five Wings Syndicate, we can't be careless for even a second."

Hotaru looked with great unease at the giant Monolith towering in the distance.

"Will we really be able to return safely?"

"The effects of the Monolith's magnetic field extend outward for five kilometers. This place is roughly sixteen kilometers from the Monolith so that means we only need to walk eleven kilometers to enter the safe range. The Gastrea we'll meet in the area should all be Stage II so they shouldn't be strong enough to pose trouble. Even if night falls, we should manage to pull through."

Rentaro did not know how much his partner understood from his brave tone of voice, but Hotaru decided to go with optimism after some thought. Looking up at Rentaro, she said:

"I get it, then let's bury those underground Gastrea alive."

Rentaro nodded briefly and agreed.

Traversing the the mini-Monoliths that were standing there, absorbing scorching sunlight, Rentaro and Hotaru climbed to the edge of the basin. Reaching a vantage point where they could look down at the research lab below, Hotaru took out the wireless switch for activating the signal then took off the safety plastic cap.

Predicting the scene that was about to occur in the next instant, Rentaro looked at the lab with his entire body tense.

"Rentaro."

A gentle voice, completely mismatching the atmosphere at the scene, caressed Rentaro's ear. He turned his head to look to the side, only to see the side of Hotaru's face blushing slightly, smiling tenderly at him with lips like a cat's.

"Thank you."

"Why thank me?"

"For everything you've done so far."

Unused to hearing thanks from her, Rentaro shifted his gaze away awkwardly and scratched his head.

"It's too early for thanks, right? It'd be funny if the detonation fails."

Hotaru closed her eyes as though feeling very happy, shaking her head slightly.

"Rentaro, I, I... Perhaps you might feel uncomfortable hearing this, but I—"

—Perhaps it was a warning from a sixth sense unique to Initiators.

Hotaru suddenly stared wide-eyed at the research lab then accelerated and charged at Rentaro.

Not knowing what was going on, Rentaro was sent flying without warning, seeing stars when his head struck a rock.

"Hey! What are you—"

Mid-sentence, Rentaro could not continue.

"I'm so glad you're safe and sound, Rentaro."

With a smile on her face, Hotaru was standing without moving from her spot. Rentaro could see her legs struggling unsteadily to maintain her footing on the ground while a trail of blood flowed down from the corner of her mouth.

Shifting his gaze down, Rentaro watched as her abdominal area and her pink tank top were gradually dyed bright red.

From the wound in the center of Hotaru's chest, warm blood splashed onto Rentaro's face.

Then she lost balance. Her head down and her knees giving way, Hotaru collapsed onto Rentaro.

Staring with eyes wide open, Rentaro caught the brown-haired girl's light body.

"Hotaru?"



Part 3

Despite having just shot his target, Yuuga did not feel any sense of victory at all. Operating the bolt to eject the shell, he chambered the next round. This series of movements was like breathing, something he could complete without particular awareness.

"...Checkmate."

Yuuga deliberately lowered his voice. If anyone else was present, the terror instilled in their hearts would probably bring about hypothermia. Yuuga's voice sounded like wind from the underworld.

Indeed, Yuuga knew he was no different from a dead man already.

Taking his sight away from the scope temporarily, he looked at his legs. Everything below the thighs were gone.

There were two reasons why blood loss was minimal. First of all, the majority of Yuuga's legs were made from carbon nanotubes and fortified artificial muscles to begin with, a cybernetic body crafted using neuromechanical engineering. One of his body's functions was the ability to constrict blood vessels at will to prevent blood flow. The other reason was very simple. Back when Yuuga had severed his legs himself, everything below the thigh was already frozen solid.

Caught in the blast of liquid nitrogen, almost going insane from the temperature flowing into his nerves, all of Yuuga's movements prior to severing the pain nerves were pretty much executed by his body automatically. He too found himself to be a battle machine completely.

Escaping death, Yuuga crawled and left the scene, climbing up up the pipes slowly, finally retrieving the sniper rifle and moving himself to a window on the ground floor.

What drove his body to continue moving was nothing else but willpower.

He had already forgotten about Hotaru Kouro. Hatred and obsession almost solidified into tangible form. No matter what happened, he would not change his determination to slaughter the enemy. Killing intent erupted violently from Yuuga's body.

The gunshot was like a cheer and blessing given to himself. The shot's recoil was like a hand rocking a cradle. The smell of gunpowder was like the enticing aroma of gourmet food.

In this half-dead state, Yuuga used the suppressor to stab and break the lab's glass window. From there he set up the gun to snipe the enemy on the hill. This series of motions were all completed with great fluidity.

The ammunition was a concentrated varanium bullet that would remain in the enemy's body.

In the end, Yuuga failed to hit his intended target. Dragging Hotaru's body, Rentaro hid behind the hill but the detonator switch in her hand had rolled down the slope.

If he wanted to retrieve it, Rentaro must enter Yuuga's firing line of sight.

However, Yuuga could not view his own situation with optimism.

The freezing was going to melt sooner or later. The blood seeping out from the capillaries in his legs would cause the blood vessel constriction function to lose its purpose. Very likely, he was going to die from blood loss.

No, that must not happen. More accurately, Yuuga was a sniper right now. Even if all the blood were to flow out of his body, as long as Rentaro appeared for an instant within his line of sight, he was going to pull the trigger with 100% certainty, witnessing his opponent's death before moving onto the afterlife without regrets.

—Before killing all the targets, a sniper will not sleep.

His two artificial eyes spun at high speed to begin super high-speed calculations.

"Not over! Things haven't ended yet. Come! Rentaro Satomi...!"

Held in his embrace, the petite body was dropping in temperature. Blood was invading the damaged lungs, making sounds like broken bellows while Hotaru desperately breathed on the verge of death. Right now, there were clear differences from the usual symptoms before her feigned deaths and regeneration.

While feeling puzzled by this phenomena, Rentaro also felt as though he could have predicted this.

This did not come out of left field. Thinking back carefully, he recalled how Yuuga's first shot in the vineyard at the lab was targeting Hotaru. Why?

Swordtail must have reported the secret of her Enhanced Regeneration ability.

But despite knowing that, Yuuga still took a meaningless shot.

The more probable guess was that Yuuga had already prepared countermeasures for Hotaru. The main point was the bullet.

The only reason why Yuuga still shot Hotaru first despite his obsession with defeating Rentaro could only be this consideration: "wanting to eliminate interference as soon as possible." With that, everything made sense.

In other words, Hotaru might never again—

Rentaro closed his eyes and inhaled forcefully. He understood he had something he must do next.

"Rentaro, I...?"

Hotaru struggled to keep her sleepy eyes open. Apart from her quivering lips that had gone blue, she really looked like she had just been roused from slumber.

Rentaro held her hand and gazed into her eyes squarely.

"The wound is nothing special. You'll revive soon enough."

Hotaru sighed as though with relief. Perhaps her mindset had already transcended pain. Her expression was very peaceful.

She raised her trembling hand. Rentaro's gaze followed her fingertips to see the M24 Sniper Weapon System dropped on the floor just now.

Rentaro understood what she was trying to convey.

"No good... I can't do it."

Seeing Rentaro falter, Hotaru smiled and said:

"Please. You must do it. If you don't, the Gastrea will... invade the Tokyo Area in full force. With that..."

—Hotaru, don't you understand that I have no talent in sniping at all? I'm useless... I even missed twice in a row when sniping an enemy on the Tokyo Tower at 100m away.

In comparison, the enemy was able to snipe a bullet train passenger from 1.2km away. Thinking with common sense, even verifying with a thousand trials, winning and losing was not going to change.

However, the girl's single-minded eyes showed a light of trust towards Rentaro.

Rentaro first closed his eyes then opened them.

"I understand."

Picking up the sniper rifle, he released the safety.

"I will definitely take that guy out and blow up the lab. You don't have to worry at all."

"But..."

Rentaro said each and every word firmly.

"I am the Savior of the Tokyo Area, after all. Don't you trust me?"

Hotaru's expression instantly became gentle and she slowly shook her head.

"The next time I wake up... I'll probably be more honest with you, Rentaro."

"Yeah."

"With that... I'll be able to gather more courage than before, to say what I must tell you no matter what."

"Okay."

Tears were falling from the corners of Hotaru's eyes.

"I finally succeeded in protecting my partner. I won't have nightmares over it ever again. I'm no longer afraid of death. It's not painful at all."

Rentaro looked down and shook his head silently.

"Thank you, Rentaro. For filling the void of my loneliness. For telling me what it means to live."

Looking up into the blue sky, Hotaru half-closed her eyes.

Reaching upwards, her hand finally fell limp.

She did not move ever again.

"Thank you, Hotaru. For willing to believe me. For fighting by my side."

Rentaro did not shed tears. Because he already knew what he must do.

Rather than waste time letting tears blur his vision, it would be better to defeat the enemy first. After all, he was the one who shouldered the dreams and hopes of others.

Opening the lid on the scope, he recalled Tina's words flashing through his mind.

'One must extinguish the soul in order to kill humans.'

Wrong. It's not like that, Tina. That's the path of evil.

The path of justice was steep and difficult to follow. Falling into the path of evil was so easy as well. However, doing so would not bring victory against that guy.

Rentaro got up and arrived at the hill's peak—In other words, he appeared in the enemy's line of sight.

Using his right hand to keep the gun steady, Rentaro rested the fiberglass stock against this left shoulder. Then he pressed his eye against the scope.

'Big Brother, please find your own reason for taking away the opponent's life.'

I want to protect others. That includes Tina, Kisara, Enju as well as everyone else within my ability.

For that goal, I—

His serene state of mind had reached the realm of utter tranquility.

Rentaro inhaled then slowly exhaled.

—Artificial eye released.

Originally shut down, the left eye activated its functions, instantly expanding his field of vision. A complicated mix of flavors spread inside his numb mouth. The nanocore processor was carrying out super high-speed calculations while the geometric patterns in his black eyeball kept spinning.

"Come, let's settle this once and for all. Yuuga Mitsugi."

When Rentaro appeared within his line of sight, Yuuga's electronic retina naturally focused on the image.

Nevertheless, Yuuga could not help but wonder if something was wrong.

"Firing from a standing posture, using his left eye... What the heck?"

Unlike a kneeling or prone position, keeping the gun steady was extremely difficult when firing from a standing position. This also meant much greater difficulty in sniping over long distances.

A single millimeter of wobbling due to the hand during firing would result in the bullet irrevocably missing the target 200m away.

Furthermore, because Rentaro was using his artificial eye for sniping, he was forced to use his non-dominant hand to pull the trigger in order to press his left eye to the scope.

Suicidal behavior no matter how you looked at it—If judged purely through common sense.

The fighting spirit in Yuuga's heart was instantly all fired up.

Knowing that Rentaro had entered the same battlefield as him, Yuuga felt his chest getting hot.

—Excellent.

What he needed to do remained the same. Disposing of the enemy in one hit.

His artificial eyes heated up and spun even faster. To Yuuga, this was his first time surpassing his limit.

The flow of time became extremely slow. The back of both eyes felt scorched as though by fire. After completing all ballistic calculations and landscape computations, he lightly pulled the DSR sniper rifle's trigger.

The opponent also shot at the same time.

The sound of gunpowder exploding. The recoil struck his shoulder.

The acute and loud noises of glass shattering. At the same, he saw through the scope that the humanoid target falling on his knees, disappearing behind the other side the of the hill.

Yuuga did not take his gaze off the scope. He understood that Rentaro had misjudged his visual aim, striking the window next to Yuuga.

Yuuga operated the bolt to chamber the next round.

He had struck the target. However, victory was not decided yet. Before the bullet hit, the enemy had twisted his body, preventing a fatal wound.

"Guh... Uwahhhhhhhh!"

The sniper rifle fell on the ground. Rentaro collapsed on his knees immediately.

The bullet had struck the wound caused by Vairo Orchestration, gouging a hole in Rentaro's flank.

Blood was seeping out from the gaps between his hands pressed against the wound, dripping on the ground. The cold sweat sliding down his face was also spreading out on the dry ground surface.

Amidst pain that was driving him insane, Rentaro tucked his chin in and smashed his forehead hard on the ground. For who knew how many times. Until his forehead tore open and spurt out blood.

Gritting his teeth hard, violent breathing like a beast's was leaking from his molars while saliva descended to the ground from the corner of his mouth.

Let me fall here. The next time I raise my head, I very well might disappear from this world for real.

Shut up, I must fight. For Hotaru, for Suibara. And for all the people who were silenced before that.

Noticing through his sixth sense that Yuuga's artificial eyes were clearly heating up, Rentaro experienced how it felt for his artificial eye to accelerate infinitely.

This was like the biological phenomenon of "coevolution" where a change in one biological object was triggered by the change in a related object, thereby affecting each other mutually.

A hundred times, two hundred times, three hundred times—Still increasing. Rentaro felt his eye about to catch fire.

Rentaro raised his head and flung it lightly. The world went blurry from the shaking. It felt like a video dropping many frames and thus very unclear. The flow of time sped up again. The viscosity of air also increased. The brightness of the sun seemed dimmer and dimmer. He felt as though he were dragged into the depths of the ocean while alive.

The noises in the surroundings turned into heavy bass, losing all meaning.

To avoid exposing himself to the enemy's line of sight, Rentaro crawled forward, desperately retrieving the sniper rifle. Operating the bolt to eject the shell, he chambered the next round.

Taking a kneeling position, he steadied the gun from the hill and looked through the scope.

As much as he tried to aim at the enemy, this time, the enemy still took action a step faster.

Instantly, Rentaro twisted his body through sheer instinct.

The sniper bullet gouged a hole at his earlier position, flinging dirt hard against his face.

Rentaro entered firing posture again. With a face covered in dirt, he gritted his teeth and looked through the scope.

This time, he was absolutely not going to falter, not going to fear.

His rate of thought surpassed 1500x. Still accelerating. In direct proportion to his thinking speed, he felt his body not obeying orders and failing to keep up with his thoughts.

1900x exceeded. The eyeball felt like it was about to burn up, making Rentaro almost scream from the scalding pain. The artificial eye made friction noises, while emitting flashing light.

—Then Rentaro's field of view turned snow-white. Sound, light and all heavy pressure disappeared completely.

For an instant, he wondered if he had been shot and died without knowing.

But that was not right. His consciousness definitely still existed. Despite the temporary numbing from adrenaline's effects, the gun wound on his abdomen still had feeling.

Raising his left hand before his face, he opened and closed his hand several times.

He looked around. The snow-white scenery felt quite blinding.

The VR training room in the Shiba Heavy Industries headquarters basement also had this kind of surreal snow-white space. However, he was obviously not at that facility right now.

Indeed, this place was—

—The other side of two-thousandths of a second: "Terminal Horizon."

'Your prosthetic eye is equipped with a limiter circuit that prevents your rate of thought from exceeding a certain upper limit.'

Sumire's sardonic voice was heard in Rentaro's mind.

'Because you will end up seeing too many things. Currently, you are still stuck on the level of calculating distances and future enemy positions or slowing down the perception of time, but frankly speaking, there is room for improvement. During clinical trials, several patients were implanted with artificial eyes like yours but without the limiter circuit. In the end, none of those people returned.'

'When things slow down to the point when one second in the real world feels like two thousand seconds, that is the limit. Every patient who exceeded this limit was unable to return due to brain damage.'

Speaking of which, the scene before his eyes was the event horizon seen by those who surpassed the limit. Perhaps this could be called the eye of God.

But none of these trivial things mattered.

Rentaro searched for the enemy's figure.

A humanoid brightness appeared ten meters ahead of him. Yuuga had emerged.

Up until now, Rentaro had clearly been sniping from the hill next to the basin, hence his muzzle ought to be pointing downwards, but now, the enemy was located in the space directly in front of him. Furthermore, the physical distance was supposed to exceed two hundred meters, but now, Yuuga was so near that Rentaro could even discern his facial expressions clearly.

Yuuga was glaring at his direction with a vicious look, but Rentaro got a sense that his eyes were not focused on him.

In any case, none of this trivialities mattered.

Rentaro rested the M24 Sniper Weapon System against his shoulder. A beat slower, Yuuga also prepared to shoot.

The trigger was pulled.

Victory.

Just as Yuuga was certain of that, he heard an unprecedented and violent impact, erupting sparks in the air.

Although it was a phenomenon difficult for mortals to even comprehend, through his brain's overclocked thoughts brought about by the artificial eyes, Yuuga could still figure it out.

"Impossible..."

Two supersonic bullets sweeping through the atmosphere had smashed head on precisely with an explosion of sound, deflecting each other's trajectory, losing the chance for an instant kill.

"A collision between bullets... Huh?"

This could not be intentional. In Yuuga's sniping philosophy, this was not a result that could possibly be brought about on purpose.

While Yuuga was staring wide-eyed in surprise, his hands moved on their own as though they were other creatures.

Ejecting the shell, reload. Aiming again, he used his artificial eye's power to make ballistics adjustments before firing again.

The crisp sound was heard again. The enemy was not taken out. Neither was he. Only the lingering echoing of gunshots remained.

Yuuga's body shuddered violently.

Not coincidence.

The enemy was deliberately performing the miracle of hitting bullets with bullets.

How could something so absurd be possible? I'm the one who has artificial eye powers in both eyes. The Professor also said that I'm the strongest user of artificial eyes in the entire world.

"...What kind of joke is this? What kind of joke is this!?"

In contrast to Yuuga's emotional outburst, Rentaro was in a state of total detachment.

Given that both sides possessed the power of assured one-hit kills, it was impossible to stick to a sniper's basic principle of "hit and run." Neither was there any need to use that method.

Rentaro did not hold his breath the instant he pulled the trigger. In this situation of "shooting downwards" with this kind of gun, Rentaro fired without caring about the zeroing in distance getting extended, yet he still struck his target.

His artificial eye was connected directly to his brain and took control of all body tissues including the motor cortex, turning Rentaro's entire person into a "sniping system."

Yuuga aimed at him for the third time. By this point, Rentaro could already see the bullet trajectory before Yuuga even pulled the trigger.

Completing ballistics predictions a step early, Rentaro was able to dodge the bullet just by turning his head. Yuuga's trigger pulling motion was even slower than him. Powerful muzzle flash erupted from gun. The supersonic bullet spiraled as it flew, brushing past Rentaro's ear like the sound of a hummingbird.

The explosive noise swept past Rentaro's face. Blood splashed out.

Operating the handle, he pulled the bolt back and ejected the shell. While the ejected shell was still flying through the air, he had already reloaded the Lapua Magnum round using the same motions in reverse.

Through the scope, he could see Yuuga staring in dumbfoundment. His lips were slowly spelling out the word "impossible."

—It's over, Yuuga Mitsugi.

Rentaro pulled the trigger. Through the action of the hammer catch and the bolt's action, the firing pin ignited the cartridge. The sound of gunshot and explosion. The recoil struck his shoulder.

Faced with the approaching bullet carrying murderous intent, Yuuga made no reaction. Until the very end, that guy was staring in Rentaro's direction with an expression of utter disbelief.

Part 4

The soles of his boots made noises on the coarse gravel as Rentaro circled over to the back of the white building. The inside of the facility was silent.

Entering through the door, he made turns along the U-shaped corridor then walked straight.

After a while, Rentaro stopped.

"Yo."

"Hi."

Yuuga was lying spreadeagled on the floor. The DSR sniper rifle was tossed somewhere as though abandoned by its owner.

"The battle, what the heck happened? I, what exactly... Why...?"

Slowly lifting his head that could still move freely, Yuuga stared at the tragic state of his chest, half-lamenting "alas..." in semi-resignation...

Rentaro did not know what he should be saying at this time.

Yuuga had killed Hotaru. No amount of hatred borne towards him would be too much. Naturally, one would want to curse this kind of enemy.

But at the same time, Rentaro felt that Yuuga was equivalent to himself.

In order to successfully use the prosthetic limbs that were accompanied by great pain while they were growing up, both of them had to go through diligent physiotherapy. Likewise, they were both users of artificial eyes who had to deal with ostracized isolation.

"Suppose we met under different conditions, we could have been friends."

Yuuga closed his eyes as though in pleasure.

"A meaningless 'if'... But it's not like I dislike it."

"Have you ever seen that snow-white space?"

"Snow-white space? ...Nope. What is it?"

"...Nothing, forget it."

Seemingly realizing what Rentaro was trying to say, Yuuga continued.

"In the end, my two artificial eyes can only accelerate up to 1800x. I've heard that artificial eyes' abilities will increase and decrease by using various emotions as energy, such as anger, sadness, cursing, hatred, hope or joy. Your emotions surpassed my inferiority complex and hatred. What exactly did you use as motivation to make your artificial eye operate faster than mine?"

"Thoughts of others."

"Those feelings are alien to me. I see, so that's why I can't surpass you."

Yuuga muttered with self-deprecation and spoke as if directed towards the sky.

"Your last shot, Satomi, ejecting the shell to reloading, the movements were so fast that I couldn't even see your hand clearly."

"...Is that what it looked like to you?"

Rentaro changed the subject.

"Yuuga, what exactly is the Five Wings Syndicate?"

"An organization transcending factions and states. Our comrades are everywhere. I can't guarantee whether any of the people you trust are members of the Five Wings Syndicate, hoho."

"...I remember you said that the wings around the pentagram indicated rank within the organization. You originally had four wings, but why did you lose two of them? What happened?"

Yuuga joked at his own expense again:

"Nothing much. Before that, I was greatly favored by Professor Grunewald, almost staying by his side all the time. But after one defeat, I was stripped of two wings and the Professor's favored protege was no longer me."

"Defeat? You lost?"

"Like you, the one who defeated me also used Tendo Style techniques."

"Huh...?"

"Didn't I mention earlier? 'I can't lose to Tendo Style Martial Arts a second time!' That's why I didn't want to lose to you. As much as I don't want to admit it, a large part of it was due to mixing in personal emotions."

"What branch of Tendo Style? ...Sword drawing, aikido, spear techniques—There were many different kinds of martial arts under Tendo Style."

"Same as you."

"Martial Arts...? Why..."

Currently, there were no longer any noteworthy successors of Tendo Style Martial Arts...

"Twelve seconds after the battle started."

Yuuga grinned as though telling the most ironic joke in the world.

"I didn't even know when the opponent approached. By the time I realized, that guy was already before my eyes. In the first three seconds, my prosthetic right arm was broken while my leg bones were fractured. Then came one-sided abuse. A fighting style very similar to yours... No, that's not right. That guy's methods were even more vicious."

Rentaro hastily asked further:

"Name! Tell me the guy's name! Who exactly was the guy who defeated you?"

At this moment, Rentaro noticed sweat appearing on Yuuga's forehead. His stamina was probably reaching a limit. Yuuga's response had nothing to do with Rentaro's question.

"Satomi, have you ever seen the ranks of the dead?"

"What?"

"Before undergoing, the Professor's, mechanized soldier operation... I was completely blind, I told you that, right? Even though my eyes couldn't see, there was one thing... I could see... Basically, all the people, after the war, statistically... Turned into Gastrea... They were all treated as, missing, wasn't that what the government asserted, for a period of time? I saw them, here, under my, eyelids.

'Neither alive, nor, dead... The ranks of the wanderers, of purgatory.

'Satomi... Heaven, is far from us, but hell... hell, is probably within a stone's throw... That close."

Yuuga's sweat-drenched face was twisted in sadism till the very end.

"This is, war... Ah. Ours, and yours. The Gastrea War, till now... still hasn't ended..."

That was it.

Yuuga vomited a ton of blood as though he had fulfilled his duty then with his eyes slightly open, soon stopped moving.

At this moment, the Five Wings Syndicate's final assassin, Darkstalker, died.

Thus, the Yuuga Mitsugi who could have been Rentaro's friend, was taken away.

Part 5

"Damn it, damn it!"

Hitsuma floored the gas pedal as hard as he could, making the car race along while cursing under his breath.

Everything was over. All of it was messed up by the Rentaro Satomi.

Just now, Darkstalker's vital signs had disappeared, serving also as proof that he had met defeat at Rentaro's hands.

Aloofly breezing through every kind of dangerous situation and surviving, even Darkstalker ended up defeated by him. Upon finding that out, Hitsuma could only feel this was like some sick joke.

Thinking back carefully, Hitsuma deeply regretted taking Rentaro too lightly in the beginning.

At first, he had thought that locking Rentaro away in a detention facility to await judgment from court would be the best way to handle things. In hindsight, this was absolutely not enough.

Even at the risk of being too aggressive and impetuous, he could have directly poisoned the food provided at the detention facility, thus preventing the current mess.

Just now, through Nest, Hitsuma had received orders from the Five Wings Syndicate to await punishment.

He would count his blessings if it simply meant getting kicked out of the organization with all his wings erased.

He must prepare himself against suddenly getting shot in the back when out on the streets.

But right now, Hitsuma was still able to carry out personal revenge against Rentaro.

Dressed in a formal suit, he stepped hard on the convertible's gas pedal.

The cross on the roof of the building in this quiet residential area came into view. This place was like the Mecca for weddings. Despite making the marriage decision in haste, Hitsuma had selected the date with some care after all.

Although one could not help but feel suspicious when choosing dates according to lunar calendar almanacs for a western wedding, the other side could only accept the explanation that this was a type of custom.

Shortly, Hitsuma was getting married—to the girl of Rentaro's dreams.

The beast lurking in Hitsuma's heart cackled with laughter.

I must defile her. I must violate her thoroughly.

Hitsuma felt especially exhilarated as soon as he imagined Rentaro gnashing his teeth and wringing his hands in chagrin.

Looking down at his watch, Hitsuma warned himself to hurry in order to make it on time. Hence he mustered even more horsepower. The appointed time had already passed.

Leaving the convertible to the valet, Hitsuma looked at the magnificent basilica-style church and the cross placed at the highest point while pushing the doors open with both hands at the same time.

In the slightly stagnant air, there was a faint fragrance of candles burning.

Numerous candlesticks were hanging on the walls, but for Hitsuma who had been under the sunny sky just now, this felt dark inevitably. Lined with stone columns, the church's interior formed a cross shape with the wings intersecting the main hall at right angles. However, with a red carpet laid out as wedding decorations today, leading to the central altar, blue light scattered through the massive stained glass window above. At the center of the altar—

"Wow...!"

Hitsuma exclaimed, forgetting all the countless flatteries he had prepared beforehand.

Black silken hair combined with a white veil and white gloves. The soft chiffon fabric of the skirt billowed out with many layers.

Such a beautiful woman was turned into a girl of pure white, standing with her back to him.

The priest had apparently not arrived yet.

Hitsuma walked in mesmerization towards the girl who had her back to him.

Walking past the churchgoer benches, finally entering arm's reach, Hitsuma grabbed her slender shoulder.

"Kisara, you're here. Great, once the priest arrives, we can hold the ceremony for just the two of us."

Hitsuma rested his hand on Kisara's shoulder.

By the time he noticed Kisara shaking his hand off forcefully, there was a black tubular object instantly in front of his nose.

Noticing it was the barrel of a Beretta 90two, Hitsuma was rendered speechless in shock and distraught.

The black-haired bride narrowed her eyes and stared at Hitsuma.

"Unfortunately, I won't be marrying you, Mr. Hitsuma. No, rather, I should call you the Five Wings Syndicate executive, Atsurou Hitsuma instead."

"What... Kisara, what nonsense are you spouting? Five Wings Syndicate executive? I've no idea what that means—"

"—Superintendent Hitsuma, you've been messing around all along, but now it's time for just deserts."

At this very moment, another voice was heard from a completely different direction. Hitsuma frantically looked over.

From the far end of one wing, the priest's entrance opened to reveal a middle-aged and obese detective. His revolver was also aimed at Hitsuma, looking like some kind of joke.

"Inspector Tadashima..."

"Unfortunately, the priest won't be coming. I'm the replacement. I can read out the American-style Miranda warning to you instead of marriage vows. You should find a good lawyer at least."

"W-What are you two talking about? Hoho, do you have any evidence?"

"Of course we do."

Raising her gloved left hand, Kisara held up a small chip.

"The *memory card*... Where the heck was it...!?"

These words were equivalent to a confession but Hitsuma did not even realize that, his mouth gaping open while panting.

"Inside here."

Saying that, Kisara took out the pocket watch that reflected sunlight.

This was the present Hitsuma had given her during the marriage interview.

"D-Don't be ridiculous! How could it possibly be in there? I've checked it thoroughly beforehand."

"It's no wonder that you failed to discover the secret inside."

Kisara tapped the pocket watch with her middle finger.

"There's a very special mechanism in this watch. Even after playing with it for a very long time, I only discovered the watch's secret when the preset time finally arrived."

"The preset time... What?"

"This pocket watch was originally the birthday present Kihachi Suibara intended to give Hotaru Kouro. Today—August 22nd—is precisely Hotaru Kouro's birthday. At the stroke of midnight last night, the music box's melody started and exposed the watch's mechanism to us. And the memory card was kept inside."

Opening his police notebook, Tadashima continued:

"Superintendent Hitsuma, I will reexamine Rentaro Satomi's testimony all over again. During interrogation, he emphasized repeatedly that 'Suibara said the evidence was stolen, which is why he wanted to seek an audience with Her Highness Seitenshi through me.' After detailed investigation, we discovered that Kihachi Suibara had indeed called the police thrice and the police did visit Kihachi Suibara's home. Each of the three times, his home had been ransacked, almost to the point that it was difficult to determine if it was the work of a thief or some kind of grudge. Now that I think about it, it was meant to convey a heavy element of warning, meaning 'Stop probing further.' But what happened next could be considered our fault on the police's side. The police who went to the scene merely returned after asking the victim some questions. Although this couldn't be helped, everyone is so busy after all, it is our bad habit that the police won't take action unless homicide is involved. Surely it was the same with the time when the pocket watch for Hotaru Kouro was stolen."

—The mentioned evidence was almost making Hitsuma impossible to breathe.

"Then the contents of the memory card...?"

"Of course I read it. Your subordinates and executives of the Five Wings Syndicate are still obstructing the police. I never expected the Superintendent-General himself to be involved in this plan."

Tadashima's revolver was shaking from anger. The grip was making noises under the pressure of his hand.

"Naturally, the details of the Black Swan Project have come to light. I was quite surprised at first but now all that remains is my anger towards you! How dare you come up with such twisted ideas to turn Gastrea into biological weapons...!"

Kisara shook her head hard.

"Why... Why, Mr. Hitsuma? I remember you were such a modest man when I first met you five years ago. When exactly did it start..."

Everything had collapsed. But unbelievably, upon realizing that, Hitsuma felt surging in his heart was not anger or resignation, but laughter.

"Very well, this saves me the effort of asking you to join us."

"Asking me to join?"

Throwing his hands apart in a spreading motion, Hitsuma took a closer step towards Kisara. Tadashima's gun was still shaking and a flash of fear appeared on Kisara's face.

"Did you think I joined the Five Wings Syndicate at my father's behest? Regrettably, that was not so. I am part of the Syndicate through my own will. Perhaps it was mentioned in Suibara's memory card, but the Syndicate's principle is to drive the Gastrea out of this world."

"But your methods are too evil!"

"How so? Victory belongs to 'those who have the will', isn't this kind of world very simple?"

"Don't you hear the mournful screams of the weak, trampled by 'those who have the will'?"

Hitsuma shrugged and spread his hands again in nonchalance.

"Oh dear, am I the only person here regarded as inhuman? Isn't that going a bit too far? The Five Wings Syndicate has investigated the matter of Kazumitsu Tendo. Despite denouncing me, you're actually feeling resonance with our beliefs in the bottom of your heart, right? No, perhaps the monster living in your heart is trying to enshrine even more evil thoughts?"

Kisara shuddered in fright, her face going livid.

"This is enough, Superintendent Hitsuma!"



Ignoring Tadashima's threat, Hitsuma continued:

"The foundation of nation building, varanium mines, will be depleted eventually one day. You must have seen warnings raised by experts on television news, right? Varanium is not only the material for Monoliths but also an essential resource for civil security weaponry and ammunition. 'Those who control the varanium mines will control the world'— Unfortunately, these words ring true without any exaggeration at all.

"Even if all the estimated varanium buried underground were dug out, it's nowhere near enough to set up Monoliths for all the nations in the world. Leaving this situation unresolved, a war to take over varanium mines will break out eventually. When that time comes, the first to be trampled are the weaklings you speak of. By making the first move, we will be able to save more people in comparison. No, or perhaps, I should say that humans, who continue to slaughter one another, sinking ever deeper into the mud of a war of attrition, will one day be utterly exterminated by the Gastrea. Intelligent as you are, you should be capable of understanding this principle.

"Hence, the necessary means is to strike first and fast. In that case, the final benefits still return to the populace. Kisara, you are qualified to join us."

Kisara stared wide-eyed in shock.

"Don't listen to him, CEO Tendo!"

Hitsuma pulled out his concealed automatic pistol and fired. Blood spurted out from Tadashima's shirt while an expression of shock surfaced on his face.

Hitsuma swiftly turned around and made his escape.

He heard gunshots from behind. The bullets made holes near his feet. Smashing into the approaching door with his shoulder, Hitsuma rushed out of the church.

As though sucking his entire body, the blue sky instantly robbed him of his sight but Hitsuma instantly entered an alley.

Puddles splashed underfoot while Hitsuma ran as hard as he could.

The plan had failed. He needed to reassess his strategy.

Although he was forced on the run at the moment and needed to come up with a new plan, all he needed to do was contact Kisara again after things blew over to recruit her. There was no need to be impatient.

A number of brilliant plans were already surfacing in his mind.

Just at this moment, a car suddenly burst into the alley with the screeching of brakes, blocking Hitsuma's path then stopping.

From behind the tinted window, a face appeared, a young man wearing a hunting hat.

"Why good afternoon, Mr. Hitsuma."

With a look of surprise, Hitsuma stared at the man.

"This voice, are you Nest?"

This was his first time meeting face to face. After all, Nest was just an important liaison, responsible for relaying missions to Hummingbird, Swordtail and Darkstalker, as well as transporting supplies.

Hitsuma suddenly came to his senses and swung his arm horizontally.

"The plan failed! Anyway, we have to rescue my father then escape to the Osaka Area before anything else. Go get the fake passports now. We're setting off immediately!"

In contrast to the urgent Hitsuma, Nest smiled at him and said:

"Your tie looks great."

"What?"

Hitsuma could not help but tuck in his chin, looking down at his tie.

It was just an ordinary black piece of decoration. This joke was not funny at all.

"What the heck are you trying to say...!?"

Gunshots fired through a suppressor were heard. Hitsuma's body wobbled.

Falling to his knees, he felt a scorching sensation all over his chest. The color spreading from his shirt was dark red.

Nest was holding an automatic pistol equipped with a suppressor.

"The Black Swan Project is cancelled. At the same time, the higher-ups have ordered all evidence related to the Five Wings Syndicate to be erased."

"Bastard... Without me, the running of the organization will—"

An orange muzzle flash erupted from the suppressor again.

This was the last image Hitsuma ever saw.

Nest continued to pull the trigger until he had emptied the magazine. Then throwing the handgun into the back seat, he gripped the steering wheel with both hands.

"Only death awaits those who fail. Farewell, the amazing Superintendent Hitsuma."

Starting up the engine, Nest sped away from the scene with immense speed.

...Leaving only a corpse abandoned in a dark alleyway.

Part 6

When the half-dead Rentaro finally reached the magnificent Monolith, it was already late at night. His footsteps were unsteady. Forcing himself to walk, every step brought him immense pain.

Not long after the battle against Yuuga, losing the assistance of adrenaline, he was struck by an onslaught of fierce pain.

Before arriving here, Rentaro had encountered Stage I Gastrea three times. Each time, he had used the remaining cartridges in his leg to take care of the enemy before they noticed him.

The summer breeze was blowing pleasantly across his skin that had lost the color of blood.

Closing his eyes, Rentaro drew that smell into his nose.

He had watched personally as the Gastrea lab was demolished using explosives.

Despite needing to hurry back on foot, Rentaro still could not resist the urge to revisit the scene in order to retrieve Hotaru's body. He even felt an impulse to take her back to the Monolith in his arms. But in his current state, all covered in wounds, there was nothing Rentaro could do.

He buried Hotaru next to the mini-Monoliths. If possible, he wanted to shift her remains to another spot as quickly as possible for a more solemn ceremony. Naturally, it would be next to Suibara's grave.

The Monolith loomed bigger and bigger in his view.

Near the boundary separating the inside and outside, a great number of red lights were flashing, making Rentaro narrow his eyes. He had no idea how they found him, but a large number of police cars had apparently been waiting for him for a long time.

Rentaro sighed. Although photos of the facility were already stored in Hotaru's cellphone, explaining the whole story was going to take a very long time.

However, things had developed beyond Rentaro's expectations completely.

"Rentaro!"

"Big Brother!"

The twintailed girl and the blonde girl ran to him at the same time, rendering Rentaro dumbfounded.

His limbs shook violently, refusing to take orders.

Rentaro truly doubted if this was a hallucination brought on by his overly strong wishes.

By the time he was certain that was not the case, Rentaro broke in to a run, forgetting the wounds on his body.

The three of them crashed together, hugging in one mass. After spinning many circles in embrace, they collapsed on the grass. So warm. So soft this feeling, like a dream. It was Enju and Tina.

"Enju! Tina!"

As much as he wanted to control, Rentaro could not prevent his face from distorting. By the time he realized, he discovered he was shedding tears.

The three of them gazed at one another shoulder to shoulder. Tina and Enju were also sniffing emotionally whereas Tina even wiped the corners of her eyes a number of times.

Calling one another's name many times like fools, the trio embraced tightly together again. As though never wanting to separate again, that was the strength of their embrace.

Rentaro could not wait to ask how they were. It turned out that both of them had been released already.

The girls chattered chaotically to answer his questions. Enju was suddenly freed from her newly assigned Promoter while Tina was quickly released and brought here by police car.

After hearing about their situations, Rentaro suddenly felt a question surfacing in his mind.

"By the way, this is so close to a Monolith. Is it really okay for you two to approach this near?"

"Oh right," said Enju with a surprised look, then immediately covering her mouth with both hands. The twintails even drooped.

"Urgh, i-it feels so nauseous. I'm going to puke."

"Me too, I feel so unwell."

"Idiots."

Rentaro could not help but smile wryly, rubbing their hair hard with his hands. The girls had apparently forgotten even something like this.

Rentaro pushed the two girls from behind.

"Okay, let's hurry home then. At this rate, you're really going to pass—"

Before he finished, Rentaro stared ahead and could not continue the sentence.

Standing in front of him was a bride. With the veil taken off, her long, straight, black hair was fluttering in the wind.

"Miss Kisara..."

For some reason, Rentaro was unable to face her directly and could only stare diagonally downwards to the right while standing there stupidly.

When Rentaro was looking completely downwards, Kisara had already walked over and was standing right before him.

"Chest."

"Huh?"

"Lend your chest to me."

"Uh, sure."

Rentaro spread his arms and Kisara threw herself into Rentaro's embrace while he was staring at the ground.

Those hands, wearing long gloves, hugging him around his back was making Rentaro's heart flutter.

"H-Hey, Miss Kisa—"

"Idiot."

Because she was pressing herself tightly against his chest, Rentaro could not see her face clearly. With the tip of her nose rubbing against his chest, Kisara shook her head.

Extremely faint trembling was transmitting from Kisara's body to Rentaro.

At this time, Rentaro also carefully hugged her back. The softness of the sensation was astounding.

"Umm, I."

"Yes."

"Is everything over?"

From his chest, he felt the girl nodding her head.

Rentaro looked up at the night sky, devoid of stars, and sighed:

"Really?"

Kisara was by his side. Enju and Tina were freed. This also meant that Rentaro's false charges had been cleared by Kisara.

As for what had happened between her and Hitsuma, why she had shown up in a wedding dress, Rentaro found it difficult to bring up.

Keeping this posture for who knew how long, Rentaro finally took Kisara by the hand and said "Let's go home."

The Monolith was right before their eyes. In order to make up for lost time during their separation, they naturally held one another's hands.

The four of them formed a row, passing through the invisible finish line to return to the Tokyo Area.

The police looked out from the many police cars gathered here, watching with dazed expressions on their faces. A fugitive drama enacted in the Tokyo Area without precedence with the CivSec who successfully escaped until finally his name was cleared in the end, perhaps they were completely shocked by the sight.

Among all this, Rentaro noticed the familiar face of Tadashima.

He apparently had his arm in a sling due to getting shot in the shoulder. His face looked graver than before. Rentaro saw the middle-aged detective silently saluting to him.

"Make way for him, everyone. The Tokyo Area's Savior is coming."

A quiet atmosphere of fervor infected the police as they began to salute to the quartet in groups. Written on these people's faces was the color of deep reverence.

Rentaro suddenly heard the sound of a music box.

It apparently came from the pocket watch Kisara was carrying.

This melody sounded nostalgic but Rentaro could not recall the song's name.

This was a victory parade with neither thunderous cheering nor the scattering of confetti.

Finally reborn, the Tendo Civil Security Company made their way to the center of the crowd under the police's watchful gaze.

Carried in the wind was the ever more intense atmosphere of summer.

Epilogue - The Two Reunited, the Two Who Passed Each Other

Turning the tap to fill a wooden bucket with water, Rentaro was startled by the cold droplets of water splashing out.

The clear water surface reflected the blue sky above, quivering with a range of water colors due to the light.

Turning his neck ninety degrees, he just happened to find an airplane flying across the midday sky with a rumble, producing a straight trail where it had passed through the air.

Rentaro was located at a graveyard very close to an outskirt zone, surrounded by a forest. The sound of cicadas was very noisy. It felt as though the forest itself was crying out.

Lifting the now-heavy bucket in his right hand, Rentaro returned to the vast graveyard that was divided into a gridded layout. He chanced upon the back figures of three girls.

Probably understanding that this was a solemn place, Tina and Kisara were more reserved than usual. The usually energetic Enju also showed cautiousness, not daring to run and jump around at will.

Rentaro and the rest of the members of Tendo Civil Security all turned to the same tombstone and changed the water in the vase, putting in a purple bouquet consisting mostly of bellflowers.

Using a wooden ladle to pour water on the tombstones, the group began to pay their respects.

"Sorry for being late, Suibara and Hotaru."

Lowering his eye level to the height of the two tombstones, Rentaro spoke.

The whole incident had essentially come to an end.

Currently, the television channels and news on the internet kept reporting the incident repeatedly.

Including the Superintendent-General, thirty police officers had framed Rentaro with the crime of murdering Kihachi Suibara, together with the other crimes they had pushed onto Rentaro coming into light, right now, the police was as chaotic as a poked hornet's nest.

Among them, the vast majority were punished and sent to court. What was to follow would depend on the court's verdicts.

The media did not mention a single word regarding the raising and experimenting of *varanium-resistant Gastrea*.

Naturally, the same went for the Five Wings Syndicate that was active as the mastermind behind the scenes.

Although Yuuga's defeat was a setback on the Five Wings Syndicate's ambitions, it did not count as solving the problem at the root.

When Rentaro infiltrated the lab, all research materials had already been taken away. Almost all of the arrested Five Wings Syndicate executives were essentially small potatoes only related to the police. As for the Hitsuma father and son who knew the inside story, both of them had died unexpectedly, hence the investigation could not continue.

After that, Rentaro had visited Tamaki, Yuzuki and Asaka at the hospital. As soon as he opened the sickroom's door, Asaka and Tamaki both greeted him while kneeling on the floor.

Rentaro remembered that the two of them should have broken bones, but Asaka's prostration posture was as standard as a textbook's. As for Tamaki who was next to her, his ass was sticking up and was cutting corners a bit in his motions.

"I offer a thousand apologies for being deceived by the villain's conspiracy."

"A man makes no excuses. Just shut up and punch us!"

Compared to those two, Yuzuki was leaning against the wall in the sickroom, seething in anger on her own.

"Didn't I say back then, that the police seemed very suspicious? You guys have a look—"

Originally feeling very serious, Rentaro could not help but burst into a chuckle due to how funny the scene was.

He stroked the surface of his left artificial eye lightly.

The Terminal Horizon he had witnessed momentarily during the battle against Yuuga had not appeared again. Even so, his sniping skills had improved dramatically.

"This should also..."

Kisara carefully placed the pocket watch before the graves as an offering.

Carved on the inner side of the lid were the words "YOU ARE ALWAYS IN MY HEART."

Probably not put on the watch on purpose, but it was almost as though Suibara had predicted his own death and left behind some final words. Rentaro could not help but feel his chest tighten.

For the sake of protecting the Tokyo Area's peace, Suibara and Hotaru had each sacrificed their lives.

Without their courageous actions, the Five Wings Syndicate's ambition would probably have been impossible to stop.

Rentaro shook his head lightly and interrupted these thoughts.

"Let's head back."

Kisara was grumbling because the consolation money paid by the police was too little; having rested at the IISO for too long, Enju was bouncing around with excess energy; Tina was apparently interrogated quite harshly by the detectives for she refused to say a single word when Rentaro inquired about conditions back then.

Due to the unbearable heat wave, Rentaro asked Enju to buy drinks at the vending machine they seldom used, but she played a prank and picked hot coffee for him. Rentaro only pulled the ring off and tried to take a sip and his tongue already felt scorched as though burnt by fire, making him feel quite irritated.

Just as the group arrived at the Tendo Civil Security Company that could finally extend business hours during summer vacation, Kisara made a surprised look as though she had noticed something odd.

"Oh my, that car is..."

Following where she pointed, Rentaro saw a sparkling black limo parked in front of the Happy Building's entrance.

The other side also seemed to have noticed Rentaro appearing in their field of view. Hence, the car door opened and a young maiden hastily ran over to him.

"Mr. Satomi!"

The girl dressed in the formal dress of pure white—Seitenshi. Due to wearing white high heels that were not designed for running in the first place, her knee twisted inward and she tripped.

Rentaro hastily rushed over to catch her in his arms, just barely managing to prevent Seitenshi from falling on the ground.

"Hey, you should be more careful—"

Rentaro was just about to complain when Seitenshi looked up to reveal her moistened eyes, forcing him to falter, even forgetting what he wanted to say.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Satomi. I was waiting in the car because you seemed to be out."

Rentaro scratched his head while avoiding her gaze.

"Uh, by the way, is there any reason why you suddenly came running all the way out here?"

With her hands overlapping on her chest, Seitenshi smiled faintly and said "ah yes" then took out a certain item from her white leather pouch to hand over to Rentaro.

"I came today to return this to you, Mr. Satomi."

"This is...?"

Rentaro received it and the first thing he saw was his own portrait photo. Listed on there were many details including various qualifications and authorization to carry firearms. The appearance was that of a card kept in a synthetic leather pass case.

This was undoubtedly Rentaro's CivSec license. Speaking of which, Rentaro had not seen it ever since handing it back to Seitenshi at the Sacred Residence.

Plunged into deep emotions, Rentaro clutched the license for quite a while, unable to move.

Back when he first acquired the license, Rentaro had started carrying it without any feeling at all.

But now that it was lost and returned, he felt a gush of scorching and heavy emotions surging from the depths of his heart.

Feeling it would sound fake no matter what he said at this time, Rentaro closed his eyes and stayed silent, exhaling from his nose.

When he noticed Seitenshi smiling at him in a welcoming manner, he could not help but frantically turn his face away.

"You could've mailed it. You slipped out of the Sacred Residence just for this?"

"You misunderstand... That is not it, that is not all..."

Seitenshi instantly hesitated before continuing while clutching her skirt with both hands firmly.

"Back when I heard you had lost your life at the Plaza Hotel, Mr. Satomi, the shock made me unable to handle administrative duties. I was so saddened that I could not even eat. Later when I learned that you were still alive, I..."

Seitenshi stopped talking despite having more to say and swallowed her words. Then with her hands that were covered by smooth gloves, she held Rentaro's hand tightly.

"You were truly outstanding this time, Mr. Satomi."

Seitenshi's beautiful face was truly radiant at this kind of distance. Even up close, Rentaro felt she was very pretty and could not help but let her do whatever she wanted.

The two of them gazed into each other's eyes for a while before suddenly regaining their senses and looking away with red faces at the same time.

Holding her bright red cheeks in her hands, Seitenshi said:

"My apologies, I cannot believe I was staring at you at such a close distance, that was too impolite of me..."

The cold glares from the girls behind, stabbing in his back, was making Rentaro break out in cold sweat.

"Hold on!"

Kisara frantically stepped between the two of them and started talking to Seitenshi in a lecturing manner.

"S-Say, Your Highness Seitenshi, I must warn you because you've never witnessed the truth. Satomi actually has no charm at all. Apart from having a stupid brain, no perseverance and his feet stinks, he also has an unlucky face that will suck away all of your energy just from one look."

Hearing that, Seitenshi felt rather incredulous. Stroking her cheek with her right hand, she looked at Kisara.

"Are you currently going out with Mr. Satomi?"

"Of course not!"

"Then why are you showing such desperation on your face?"

"I'm not desperate at all!"

Gnashing her teeth, Kisara looked back to glare at Rentaro.

"Hey, Satomi!"

—Why am I the one at fault now?

"Big Brother, were you merely flirting with me?"

"Rentaro, were you only toying with me too!?"

Tina seemed sad while Enju made an angry look as the two of them yelled at Rentaro.

Rentaro really wanted to scream and scurry away with his head in his hands when he heard a cheerful male voice saying: "Oh, even Her Highness Seitenshi came here as well!"

It was a man in his fifties, dressed traditionally in haori and hakama with a fan in his hand and a hairstyle resembling a pineapple. Cheerfully smiling while going "Hi!" first, it was hard to imagine someone of his age using this kind of greeting that youngsters would use.

Seeing an unexpected ally, Rentaro could not help but call out happily:

"Isn't this Mr. Shigaki!?"

The man—Senichi Shigaki—laughed in a jolly, exposing his white teeth.

"I've been wanting to find a time to visit you guys but never expected even Her Highness Seitenshi to make her arrival."

Seitenshi instantly greeted seriously:

"Greetings to you, Mr. Shigaki. Is business going smoothly for your varanium mines lately?"

"Ha, not too shabby, I guess."

"Never would I have expected the Honorable Kikunojyo's former butler to have become a tycoon."

"Not at all, I just happen to have a bit of business talent in that area."

"Are you intending to participate in the election this time?"

"Speaking of which, embarrassing as it may be, but please don't laugh at me if I lose the election and become unemployed, wahaha."

After the pleasantries, Shigaki turned to Rentaro and Kisara, making a very apologetic expression.

"Kisara, umm... I'm so sorry about what happened this time. I wanted to come here to apologize to you."

Rentaro also knew that he was referring to the marriage interview.

"I introduced him to you because I originally thought it was a match made in heaven. Never did I expect that brat and the Superintendent-General to be involved in unlawful affairs... And in the end, that brat came to that kind of end—I'm so sorry."

The elderly man was bowing low to apologize. Seeing him act in such an adult manner, Kisara smiled leniently and said:

"No, Mr. Shigaki, since there were no actual damages, I don't consider it much of a problem."

"Wahaha, I knew you were going to say that."

At this moment, Rentaro felt someone tug the hem of his clothing, prompting him to look back to see Tina and Enju looking up at him with worried looks.

"Rentaro, who is this mister here?"

"Oh right, this is the first time for you two to meet him. He's Mr. Shigaki."

Rentaro waved his hands and introduced Enju and Tina to Shigaki before introducing Shigaki to him.

"He's elderly Mr. Senichi Shigaki, the proprietor of Tendo Civil Security on paper who also serves as Miss Kisara and my legal guardian."

"Oh, so he's such a great mister."

"N-Nice to meet you, I am in your care."

Shigaki crossed his arms and tensed his face as he looked at the two girls with opposite personalities. Then he relaxed his facial muscles and stroked the two girls' hair in a friendly manner.

"Wahaha, you've got such cute little ladies by your side. You brat, the Shiba daughter also seems quite smitten with you. What's going on? Isn't five-timing spontaneously going way too far? Aha?"

Shigaki elbowed Rentaro a couple of times, causing him to reflexively deny "that's not true—" In that instant, the coffee in his hand spilled out from the can. The hot liquid flew towards Shigaki's haori sleeve—

Ah—by the time Rentaro cried out, it was already too late.

"Hot!"

Shigaki hastily knelt down and rolled up his coffee stained sleeve. Rentaro frantically went over to have a look but Shigaki swiftly took out his handkerchief to wipe then rolled down his sleeve again.

Staring at the can of coffee in Rentaro's hand, Shigaki scolded:

"W-What's with you, brat, buying hot coffee in this kind of hot weather? Is something wrong with your brain? Or is that the in thing with kids these days?"

"H-Hey, compared to that, did you get scalded just now?"

Completely unconcerned, Shigaki went "Hmm? It's okay." However, the worried Tina still suggested: "The office is close by, would you like to rinse it with a bit of cold water?"

Shigaki seemed hesitant, taking a while before deciding to borrow the sink at the office.

Feeling something was not right, Rentaro accompanied Shigaki up the stairs of the Happy Building.

Accompanied by Tina and Rentaro, Shigaki ascended the Happy Building's staircase. While watching them from behind, Enju remained motionless as though pinned to the spot.

What was that? Enju wondered with her arms crossed.

It looked like she was the only one who noticed but the instant Shigaki rolled up his sleeve in panic when the coffee was spilt, Enju saw it for a split second.

Was that his hobby? Enju saw signs of something similar to a tattoo on Shigaki's upper arm. Furthermore, it was a pentagram design with five wings on the tips, a fancy design that did not suit this old man at all.

But not one with a habit of thinking deeply about such things, Enju soon forgot this trivial detail given her naturally straightforward personality, running after Rentaro in a patter of footsteps.

Having made a fortune through the excavation of varanium mines, Shigaki lived in his personal mansion located in the prime real estate zone inside the Tokyo Area's first ward.

Inside the study for which entry was forbidden to everyone apart from himself, half of one wall was buried behind bookshelves. Here, classics and dictionaries from past and present were collected, waiting quietly for the day when someone would open them.

If someone with knowledge of architecture were to examine the outside of the mansion before entering this study, they would be able to deduce from appearances that this room's area seemed much smaller than it should.

Having returned to his study, Shigaki went over to the innermost row of bookshelves instead of sitting down in front of the top-quality desk of mahogany. Pulling out the third volume of the *Great Dictionary of Weapons around the World*, he inserted a key into the keyhole inside and turned.

With that, the mobile bookshelves called "electronic compact" became powered by electricity, allowing the shelves filled with books to move along the rails.

The bookshelves occupying an entire wall were quickly moved away to reveal a passage leading into another room.

Shigaki strode his way through the depths of the dark passage, apparently quite familiar with this place.

Inside this abyss where it would not be surprising to suddenly kick something by accident, the darkness soon reached the point where one could not see their hand even if they waved it before their face.

But at this time, the floor suddenly glowed with faint blue light and then the light came on with a pop, illuminating a leather executive chair. Shigaki sat on that chair, causing a beam of light to extend outwards like a ghostlights, tracing out a pentagram design with complicated wings on the floor in one stroke.

'Too slow, fool. How reprehensible of you to make me wait for so long.'

Upon closer examination, there was another executive chair identical to Shigaki's and located at one of the pentagram's tips. With beard linked to his hair, the arrogant man's head looked like it was adorned by a lion's mane, sitting haughtily with legs crossed.

He was the one and only Sougen Saitake, the highest-ranked Five Wings Syndicate executive of Osaka.

As the Tokyo Area's highest-ranked executive, Shigaki looked around and saw that they were the only two people visible at the tips of the pentagram in view. The other three chairs were empty.

"Ignoring Hokkaido, which is understandable given current events, but what's with Hakata and Sendai?"

'Who knows. After all, you and I can make decisions if anything happens.'

Saitake's body was a holographic projection composed of faint blue light.

—This was an Five Wings Syndicate executive meeting which only a select few "Five-Winged" members could participate. Right now, this was what Shigaki was attending.

Shigaki was the first to speak solemnly.

"Just now, I encountered Rentaro and the rest. That brat is still all carefree despite having just destroyed my plan."

'The "cells" we've planted in the police force have been weeded out, what a painful defeat.'

"Not entirely. It's good to take this opportunity to switch out those trash. Furthermore, rather than calling this a failure, I'd say that the one who visited the Tokyo Area without my knowledge, trying to eliminate Seitenshi, should be the one who's utterly disgraced, wouldn't you agree?"

'You're great at sarcasm as always, bastard.'

Saitake looked up in annoyance, exhaling before he continued:

'I believe that the plan to assassinate Seitenshi is the most effective. That was meant to be her final warning. If she still continues to extol that childish idealism of hers, we'll have to order the kill without mercy. I hate dealing with that type of person, you should know that very well, right? Those who disobey must be eliminated with force, that's my style.'

"Saitake, your understanding of the Tokyo Area is still not enough. In order to maintain the Tokyo Area's political system, someone like Seitenshi who's akin to an idol is essential. Although the chaos caused by her assassination would be helpful in my pursuit of authority, the effects are still inferior to that of eradicating the Tendo clan. Hence, the first person that needs to be killed is Kikunojyo Tendo."

'In that case, why are you trying to recruit Kisara Tendo in such a roundabout manner? Shigaki, is that woman really worth you spending so much effort to persuade?'

Shigaki shook his head in disagreement.

"That's because you have no idea without seeing photos from the scene where Kazumitsu Tendo was slaughtered. That little lady is a monster from the Tendo clan."

'Oh?'

"Besides, I've heard that her ultimate objective is to kill Kikunojyo Tendo, which aligns with our goal."

'Hmph, in any case, all that lobbying still ended up in failure.'

"No, it succeeded."

'Hmm?'

Shigaki grinned.

"I said, it already succeeded."

Trying to discern Shigaki's true thoughts, Saitake fell silent.

"By the way, how are things on Juujouji's side?"

'Hmph, gradually reaching a climax, I suppose. I originally expected you to be the second to reach the top after me.'

"What? You're pretty good at sarcasm too."

'All thanks to a certain great pioneer.'

Shigaki and Saitake's shoulders shook in the dark from light laughter.

'With that, the heads of state for both the Osaka Area and the Hokkaido Area are now members of the Five Wings Syndicate. There are three remaining Areas. Don't forget our dream and our great mission.'

"Glory to the Five Wings Syndicate."

'Glory to the Five Wings Syndicate.'

The blue glow instantly vanished as darkness devoured everything in sight.

Something somewhere sounded like a very sad dog barking afar.

The night gradually grew later. Under the brilliance of the streetlights, Rentaro Satomi was dragging lazy steps while returning home.

The gunpowder smell on his body was giving him a splitting headache.

His arm was extremely sore from recoil and it was already incredible that it was not dislocated. He could not help but worry whether he would be able to pick up chopsticks.

He tried covering his ears with both hands. Indeed, he was suffering from a severe ringing in his ears. Despite putting on ear protection carefully, it still could not resist the astounding noise from the newest models of guns and ammunition that Miori had brought out one after another.

He had spent the entire day at Shiba Heavy Industries to serve as a tester for their products.

Miori was still currently developing powerful ammunition and handguns exclusive for Initiator use. She said that she could provide them for Tina to use for free once they were done. This suggestion was more than welcome to Rentaro's ears.

Regarding the incident this time, Miori had not said anything except "My dear Satomi, you owe me one." This deliberate attempt to keep her distance made him feel extremely comfortable instead.

Incredibly, carrying this pleasant sense of exhaustion, he climbed up the apartment's metal staircase then turned the door handle at his own home.

"You're back, Satomi."

Behind the suddenly opened door was a girl dressed in a black sailor-style uniform.

"O-Oh my, it's Miss Kisara?"

With a frilly apron over her black uniform, Kisara circled around to Rentaro's back with a look of delight and pushed him in through the doorway.

Loosening his tie and taking off his jacket, Rentaro looked around his home. The girls who ought to be present were nowhere in sight.

"Where are Enju and Tina?"

"They went to watch the fireworks show organized by the neighborhood association."

Rentaro clapped his hands.

"Oh right, that's the event where we need to pay 500 yen. So it's being held today."

In any case, nothing amazing was going to come out of charging people only 500 yen. However, Rentaro had not watched fireworks even once this year and felt an urge to chase after Enju and Tina.

Probably reading Rentaro's face, Kisara shook her head gently.

"You can't go. The age limit is set for little children under twelve. There will be a fireworks performance on a much grander scale in an upcoming festival, so let's all go when the time comes."

Then tonight, I can enjoy a rare chance to be alone with Kisara.

Only then did Rentaro notice there were all kinds of plates on the low table. The kitchen also showed signs of having been used.

An unpleasant odor was drifting in from somewhere. Breaking out in cold sweat, Rentaro asked:

"Miss Kisara, did you cook by any chance?"

Kisara smiled without saying anything, waving her hands in front of her. All ten fingers were wrapped in band-aids.

"Uh, I'm not pleased every time everyone criticizes my cooking skills for being bad, so I tried to force myself to improve."

Admitting defeat to the "hurry up and eat" killing aura exuded from Kisara, Rentaro reluctantly took his seat. As the foul odor akin to vomit instantly entered his nose, he could not help but whisper "Oh God" and close his eyes.

On the plate was gelatinous substance, showcasing the color of despair like some mentally ill artist had hammered on the canvas as hard as possible. The sight alone was enough drive a person insane—Rentaro finally understood the meaning behind such words.

His eyes were watering from the irritating stench, but he desperately covered it up by telling Kisara he was crying out of joy.

Taking a spoon, he scraped a spoonful of the gelatinous substance. The unusually elastic substance quivered violently as though in utter joy. Rentaro prepared himself and sent it into his mouth.

Instantly, he entered a state of nirvana. His father Takaharu Satomi was smiling on the far shore, waving and calling out to him with a smile.

"Ugh, how disgusting—"

"It doesn't taste... good?"

Kisara glared at him viciously with a gaze screaming bloody murder.

"It's so tasty that it drives people mad!"

"Yes, praise me more."

"It's like food made by that artist who sliced his own ear! This is what's known as a fearsome sight to behold!"

"Hehe, how pleasing."

Kisara was an idiot, blushing in the face without discovering Rentaro's roundabout mockery.

"Hey, stop looking down on me, okay!?"

—Things did not go as smoothly as hoped. Rentaro was exposed at once.

Kisara angrily stood up and scratched her hair hard.

"Ah—Jeeze, umm... Uh, oh right, why don't you just teach me how to cook, Satomi?"

"Huh?"

Kisara suddenly squeezed her knees together shyly and rubbed the thighs against each other.

"Satomi, before the incident happened, didn't you say you'll teach me to cook next time? Think back a little, it was that time with the sweet potatoes."

Now that it was mentioned, Rentaro had some recollection too.

After thinking, he got up and rolled up his sleeves.

"Then what do you want to learn?"

"...Teach me the trick to stir frying vegetables."

Apart from using a frying pan, was there any trick to that...?

Re-tying her apron, Kisara took out some spinach from the fridge to cut up.

Standing behind Kisara, Rentaro served as the supervisor—That was what he intended to do, but soon, he could no longer bear to watch. Hence, he held Kisara's hand from behind to guide her on how to use the kitchen knife.

Chop, chop—The kitchen knife made knocking sounds on the cutting board in a not too clean manner. The television in the living room was not on. Time was flowing past quietly.

"Umm, Miss Kisara."

"Hmm?"

"About Hitsuma... Did you ever like him?"

Kisara moved her hand silently. All Rentaro could hear was inorganic knocking sounds.

This silence was suffering.

Kisara finally answered, facing forwards.

"I don't know."

"I see..."

"However, I don't think it really counts as love."

"But... Didn't you kiss Hitsuma?"

Realizing his sulking tone of voice, Rentaro instantly hated himself a little.

However, Kisara stared wide-eyed and murmured "You saw that...?" Her surprise was far more than Rentaro's.

"No, that didn't happen. I used my palm like this to block him, then when Mr. Hitsuma leaned in, I pushed him away like this—"

Kisara also felt that her movements were like lying. Just when she was pondering how to convince Rentaro—Rentaro laughed.

Conversely, seeing her serious face, Rentaro knew he was worrying too much for nothing.

"I've never done any of those things you're thinking about, Satomi. So, I'm, s-still a virgin... Yeah."

"O-Oh."

While feeling his heart pound due to the naughty word Kisara said, Rentaro poured salad oil in the frying pan and added the spinach. The green vegetables sizzled then gradually shrank.

"B-By the way, have you heard that the Hokkaido Area got a new prime minister?"

Rentaro originally thought Kisara would ignore this topic but she still said softly although without looking back: "I was taken by surprise too."

"I never thought Prime Minister Kiryuu would pass away like that."

Back when they were living in the Tendo mansion in their childhood, Rentaro and Kisara had met this man several times.

"I jumped in fright as well I thought that guy would live healthily to a hundred years old."

"Hey, did you hear about that rumor?"

"Rumor?"

"This is only hearsay but Prime Minister Kiryuu suddenly collapsed with his hand pressed against his chest after eating breakfast, never waking up again. There were many suspicious points about his body, apparently, but try as they did to investigate in detail, things were forcibly covered up under pressure from somewhere, ending the investigation all of a sudden with a verdict of death by disease."

Rentaro was shocked.

"What's going on?"

Kisara shook her head powerlessly.

"I'm not too sure."

"This new prime minister, a guy called Tsukihiko Juujouji, is okay, right?"

"He's said to be a very experienced and competent man."

Rentaro's feelings were very complicated. If anything, Prime Minister Souichi Kiryuu was someone whose arrogant attitude and insistence on distancing himself from evil earned him dislike and criticisms behind his back from others. However, he was able to rebuild the Hokkaido Area in merely a decade's time during the period of devastation after the war, showcasing astounding leadership in the process.

He was definitely not the kind of person whose death would bring about the populace's applause.

Because only frying spinach seemed a bit plain, Rentaro filled a kettle with water and placed it on the adjacent gas stove after seeking Kisara's consent, then turned the switch.

Hot air instantly brushed past Rentaro's face with the smell of gas. Blue flames burned intently.

Rentaro moved the long chopsticks. The spinach continued to sizzle.

When teaching someone to cook, it was perfectly natural to stand behind the student while explaining, but somehow, this looked like hugging the person.

Kisara's beautiful hair was giving off fragrance. Rentaro also thought that her attire of sailor-style uniform plus apron looked very good on her.

"By the way, Miss Kisara, why do you keep wearing this uniform all the time? Is it to match me?"

"The uniform can be worn during jobs so I can go to work directly after school while dressed like this. Naturally, from a normal girl's perspective, my selection of clothing is a little limited, but I do have other casual clothing. It's just that it's much less than a normal person's, that's all."

Kisara placed particular emphasis on "much less" while looking up at Rentaro's face with eyes of anticipation, exerting invisible pressure in the process.

Rentaro scratched the back of his head while turning his gaze elsewhere.

"W-Would you like to go clothes shopping together next time?"

"Oh—Really—Then I must ask you to treat me to a couple pieces of expensive clothing."

Kisara was so happy that she was about to hum a song, her mini-skirt swaying together with her bottom.

Rentaro could not help but feel excited and continued:

"B-But that kimono you wore during the marriage interview was very pretty, and the wedding dress was also very beautiful... However, what suits you best, Miss Kisara, is still this black uniform. You're extremely beautiful like this already, honest."

Staring wide-eyed, Kisara turned her head to look back at Rentaro.

Why was love something so unequal? The amount of feelings one held for one person were often disproportionate to the feelings the other person held in return. The scales were always tipped to one side.

What must I do to transmit this unbearable feeling in my heart to her?

Rentaro felt his throat go speechless, awkward in his inability to speak.

In front of the one he loved, he really was clumsy and awkward to the point of wanting to die.

To substitute for the words he could not voice as he wished, Rentaro took a step towards her.

"M-Miss Kisara!"

He hugged Kisara around her slim waist, pulling her towards him. Kisara cried out lightly in Rentaro's bosom.

That unbelievably beautiful face was up close right before his eyes, her sweet breath stimulating Rentaro's nasal cavity. Kisara's face gradually blushed red as she twisted her body, trying to escape.

"No, wait, Satomi... Where are you touching—"

"—Back at the visiting room."

"Huh?"

Rentaro lowered his head, bringing his lips against Kisara's ear.

"I said very terrible things to you, Miss Kisara—I'm truly sorry. It's all because I was too stupid. I shouldn't have said those things. Although so much time has passed, I'm still very happy I can return. Thank you, Miss Kisara."

Kisara's eyes, staring wide from surprise, instantly overflowed with a large volume of transparent liquid, sliding down her face from the corners of her eyes.

Kisara tried to wipe the corners of her eyes with her fingertips. Raising her long eyelashes that were originally lowered, she looked up at Rentaro while half-closing her eyes gently.

She was weeping with joy.

"Idiot, I've been waiting so long for you to tell me this."

"Miss Kisara..."

She was too beautiful. Greatly touched, Rentaro brought her face close. Only then did Kisara suddenly regain her senses and turned her blushing face to the side.

"Wait, Satomi, in the end, that kind of thing... Still no good—Too embarrassing... I really feel like dying."

The usual Rentaro would probably have respected Kisara's feelings and readily released her body.

But Rentaro was already utterly exhausted by this question without an answer. Even if his dreams were to end up shattered, before he witnessed the conclusion with his own eyes, he refused to let go.

Rentaro slightly relaxed his embrace around Kisara against his bosom.

"Very well, Miss Kisara, if you don't like this, I'll stop right here."

"R-Really?"

"I lied."

Rentaro was whispering softly in her ear.

Then he forcibly pressed his lips on top of hers.



The kettle whistled from the boiling water.

With a clatter, the long chopsticks Kisara was holding fell to the floor.

Sumire had said:

'Suppose you simply wish for Kisara to be happy, that means you must keep suppressing your emotions henceforth. This is something you cannot quit halfway, can you swear on it?'

In the end, Rentaro had broken his promise with Sumire.

Rentaro's beliefs had not changed. Back when Kisara was getting engaged to Hitsuma, if Kisara could be made to forget revenge and live the rest of her life properly, that would have been the only and final solution.

Even if Rentaro was to end up broken hearted, it would not be a bad thing as long as it could forever seal away the "Tendo who killed Tendos." However, despite knowing that clearly—

—What was known as love was actually insane behavior.

Rentaro was insane because of Kisara.

Pus forming out of infatuation, decay resulting from love.

There was already nothing that could halt her quest for revenge.

This love shall surely lead the world to its destruction.

At the last moment, Rentaro still ended up choosing in self-interest. The price of that would very likely be paid one day. By that time, he was surely going to deeply regret missing the best opportunity to stop Kisara.

As long as Rentaro continued fighting to uphold "justice," it was impossible for him to compromise with Kisara's mindset of "absolute evil."

Kisara was going to continue raising her sword in vengeance against the Tendos. Every kill was going to deepen the gulf between her and Rentaro.

Perhaps it would become impossible to review sweet memories again.

This moment was the climax and henceforth, he might very well end up rolling down the mountain in a battle of hatred against Kisara.

However—

Even if their relationship was going to worsen absolutely from this point onwards, cursing each other in profanities, stabbing blades of hatred at each other's chest—Right this moment, Rentaro simply wanted to lose himself in the sensations of her soft lips.

Pushing Kisara against the fridge, he sucked on her lips intensely. Kisara's soft bosom was pressing against Rentaro's chest with pressure to the point of deformation.

Kisara partially closed her eyes in ecstasy, extending her arm to embrace Rentaro's neck.

Despite wanting to lose himself in this rapture, Rentaro could not dispel Dr. Sumire's gloomy words from his mind.

'Atrophied physical abilities are quick to recover, but decay of the mind is incurable.'

'Suppose it is too late to rectify Kisara—you are responsible for eliminating her.'

- Enju Aibara. Internal Gastrea Virus Corrosion Rate: 43.8%
- Estimated number of days to live: 496

Author's Notes

Black Bullet is set to be animated! Thank you to everyone for your support and encouragement!

—However, can I really breathe a sigh of relief and feel joy from the bottom of my heart? To be honest, I'm slightly hesitant.

Actually, I am simply pouring my blood and sweat to make things come alive purely with words so as to maximize the work's ability to entertain. I'm not too interested in turning my books into other types of media and to be frank, it's hard for me to imagine it.

But everyone in animation production I met has shown themselves to be formidable people carrying both a fired up spirit and calm analytic ability. After understanding their values and character—saying that somehow seems like I'm putting myself on higher ground—I have decided to entrust my work to them. There's no longer any need to doubt.

There's still half a year until the anime will air. Gathering specialists from various areas, racking their brains thoroughly to raise the quality of the anime, I'm sure everyone will be working hard to create this series.

What would the anime version of *Black Bullet* actually be like? I'll have to rely on the audience to decide this answer and result.

So everyone, please show your support for the animated adaptation of *Black Bullet*.

Still taking care of me lots, even when tormented by hellish crisis of "oh crap, the skylight needs to be opened", the most intense to this point, always smiling the whole time, editor in charge Mr. Kurosaki; the esper illustrator Ms. Ukai who can always point out the direction of north no matter where in the world; Director Kojima in charge of producing the anime and all staff working under him; producers Ogura and Ogasawara; the editorial department and everyone else involved with this book: I offer my humble thanks.

Finally, let me tell you, dear readers, although this is something personal and not worth mentioning, roughly three years ago when I first joined the Dengeki group and met Mr. Kurosaki for the first time, I made a bold declaration of "I'm going to sell a million copies and get an anime adaptation!" in a style reminiscent of the manga *Bakuman*.

Back then, I wasn't thinking much, just feeling that rather than for myself, I needed to give the newly appointed Mr. Kurosaki a motive for raised spirits. In any case, these bold words finally came true. I didn't turn into someone who tells lies and don't turn in drafts. This is all thanks to everyone. I hereby repeat the thanks in my heart.

Regardless of the anime's result, I don't want the original work to be overshadowed. In the end, to those readers who have experienced the anime, the manga and the novel, I must try my very best to tell them that "each one has their own merits, but in the end, the novel is the most interesting!"

I am truly grateful to you for picking up this book.

I wish for God's blessings to all the dear readers of my work.

Shiden Kanzaki